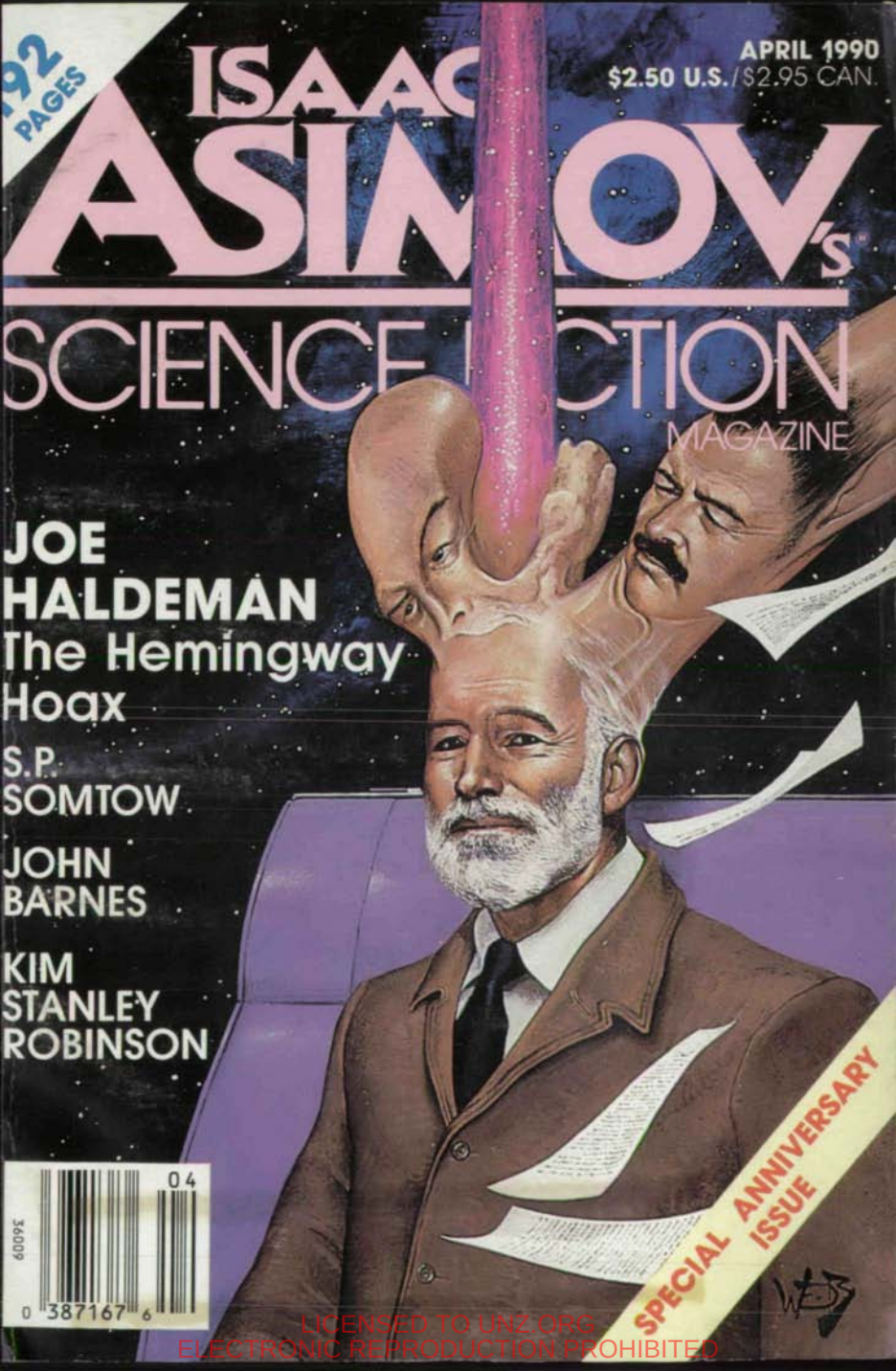

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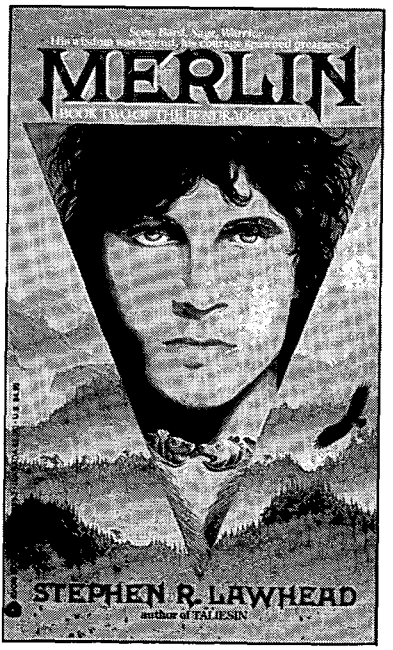

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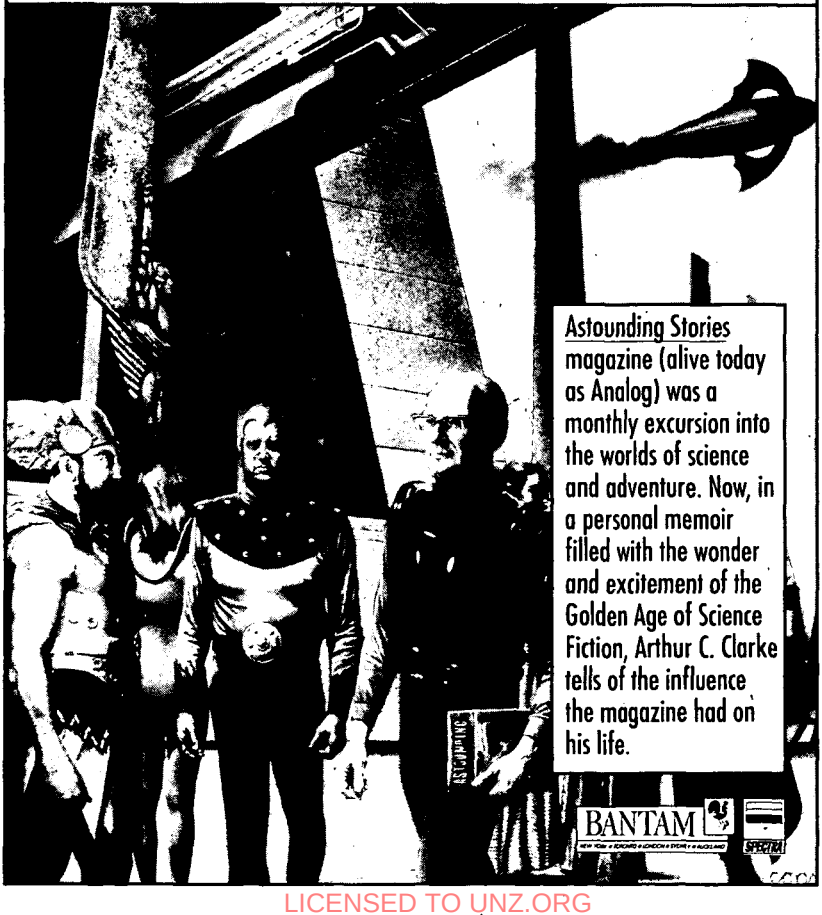

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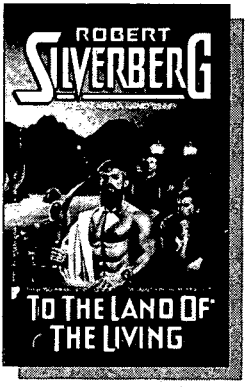

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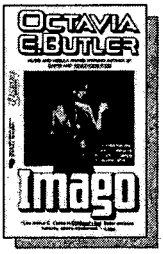

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Since the time of Gilgamesh, we have always revered the champion and immortalized his heroic exploits. Brilliant leaders, bold warriors, and brazen rebels, who all lend themselves to the scribes of literature, later emerge as heroes.

However, the unassuming, intellectual, less adventurous types can also be heroes, such as Jodahs, blazing a trail of new existence in the cosmos. With any luck, maybe editors can become heroes too. (I can dream, can't I?)

When you see me around, ask me about apes, ants, and evolution (it's springtime after all).

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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Next issue on sale
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Published every 28 days with two issues combined at year end by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.50 per copy ($2.95 per copy in Canada). Basic subscription of fourteen issues $33.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $38.65, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. For back issues send $3.50 to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1990 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to IAsfm, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3E1. ISSN 0162-2188.

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

POSTHUMOUS

I received a letter the other day from one of our western states. A television station there has nominated three individuals to leave a "lasting testament" in the form of a "final message to all mankind."

I am one of the three chosen and I am told my address, to be recorded before a live audience in the western state I referred to, would "serve as a future posthumous tribute" to my life.

As it happens, though, I don't travel, and there is no chance that I could go to the western state for this or any other reason, but never mind that. Suppose it were suggested that I do it in New Jersey, or even in Manhattan. I still don't think I would want to.

Although I am no longer in the prime of my youth, I am not yet in the mood to start thinking about posthumous tributes.

As you probably know (but I will tell you, anyway) "posthumous" is from a Latin word meaning "last" or "latest." Its original meaning is with reference to a child born after the death of the father and, therefore, the last (legitimate) child he will have. By extension, it means any work published after the death of the writer. By further extension, it refers to any aspect of the life of someone that makes itself evident after that someone's death.

I will now leave that matter and speak of a letter I received from a reader, one which is not included in the letter column. It may not seem to have anything to do with what I've just spoken of, but believe me, I will lead it back to the subject.

The letter-writer had a lot of faults to find with my recent novels, which he thought were perfectly terrible. I react to such things with equanimity, of course, because it is quite impossible to please everyone.

It turned out, though, that he thought I was placing far too much emphasis on sex, presumably for the purpose of titillating the readers, appealing to their baser instincts, and increasing the sale of my novels. That astonished me, for as anyone who reads me will know, there is very little sex in my fiction.

I read the letter carefully and found that he was speaking particularly of my novel *Foundation and Earth*. On reviewing that novel in my mind, I recalled that my hero

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did, indeed, have sex with two women in the course of the novel. However, both occasions were essential to the plot, and on neither occasion was there even the slightest actual description of the proceedings. I assure you that titillation was zero and that any baser instincts on the part of my readers must have been incredibly easy to appeal to.

But then I read on and found out that he was particularly horrified that I should describe this carefree attitude toward sex on the part of my hero in an age when AIDS has become such a scourge.

Well, yes, AIDS is indeed a scourge right now. I won't deny it, although I don't believe it has made much of a dent in the popularity of sex among the general population. However, *Foundation and Earth* takes place 20,000 years in the future, at which time AIDS has been cured and no longer been a scourge for 19,950 years. Didn't that occur to my concerned reader?

Furthermore, the reader is placing a horrifying restriction on scenes of passion. Can you imagine reading the following:

" 'Take me. Take me, my loved one,' she breathed, panting, her heavy-lidded eyes pleading.

" 'I will, my dear, I will. I can't wait. —But may I see the doctor's report on the state of your serum AIDS antibody content.'

" 'Oh, yes, I've got it here somewhere. And you get out yours, too, will you.' "

Remember, also, that AIDS is

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not the first medical scourge that frightened humanity. Suppose Shakespeare had had Juliet say, when she is bemoaning that it is only Romeo's name of "Montague" that stands in the way of their love.

". . . Romeo, doff thy name;

And for that name, which is no part of thee,

Take all myself, provided thou canst show

Thyself as free of leprosy or more Despiteful ill."

Or we can have Elizabeth Barrett Browning say, swooningly,

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

First with shrewd insightful care, a testing

That you have not caught a vile consumption."

At this point, I thought to myself how fortunate it is that I'm editorial director of this magazine and get a chance to read all these letters. If I didn't see them with my own eyes, I would never believe the depth and height and width of human folly. If others came to me and told me that *they* had received letters like that, I would refuse to believe it. In fact, I'd be astonished if you believed me. You probably think I'm making it up, but I'm not. If you're in the mood to accept my word of honor, I swear I'm not.

But now I must tell you the last line of the letter, which was a cry from the heart, if ever I heard one. It was: "Dr. Asimov, please don't write any more."

My own heart smote me at that. It seemed to me I could hear the tears in his voice, the pleading tone, the agony. Had I the right to refuse him?

And yet could I accede to this pitiful appeal? After all, I've been writing for over fifty years. I've been doing practically nothing *but* writing for over thirty years. It is an addiction more powerful than alcohol, than nicotine, than crack. I could not conceive of not writing. If I tried, I would waste away and be reduced to a wraith of smoke that would flicker—flicker—and be gone.

So I thought— Why don't I put it up to the readers? I will ask them if they want me to stop writing. If a majority insists that they would like to have me write, out of pity and for old times' sake, even if the stuff *is* lousy, then I can continue to write with an easy conscience and all will be well.

However, *don't* vote on the matter. I have decided not to put it up to the readers. I am afraid, after all, that a majority might vote against me and, if that is so, I don't want to know. Writing under the false impression that people want me to, may be a fool's paradise, but I'll settle for that. It's better than no paradise.

Besides, another thought occurred to me. After all, even if no one in the world wants me to write, they don't really mean they don't want me to *write*. They just don't want me to *publish*.

Surely, nobody would mind if I wrote, if I merely allowed the manuscripts to pile up in a corner

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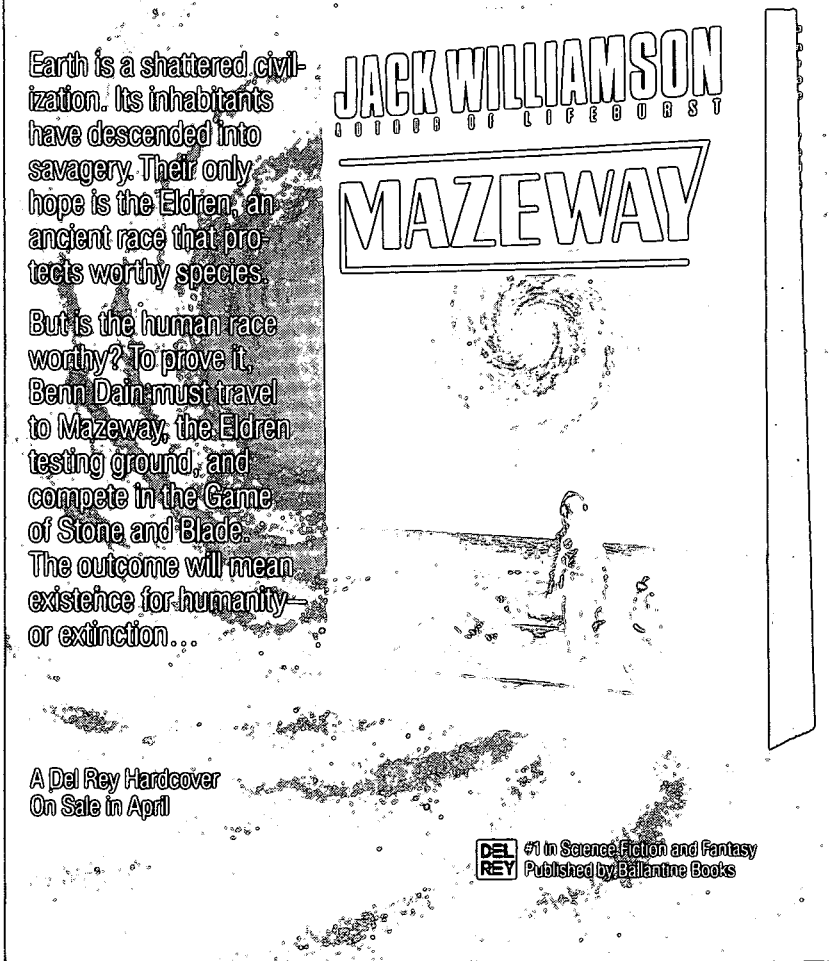

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of my study—novels, short stories, essays, and so on. As long as no one was expected to read them, why would anyone care if I amused myself in this manner?

And if I did—

Here something struck me as so remarkable, that I have concluded it is a marvelous answer to the problem of how I am to see to it that my survivors will be well taken care of after I go to that trillion-byte word processor in the sky. So far, I have only been able to gather together a little excess savings, set up a couple of small trust funds and so on, and heaven only knows how the inheritance taxes will devastate them.

But if I leave that pile of unpublished manuscripts, my survivors and the executors of my estate can start selling them to various publishers as posthumous works of the great Isaac Asimov. Since they are posthumous, there are bound to be only a limited number, and no one need point out that if I manage to hang on a few more years I can easily turn out half a dozen novels, fifty non-fiction works, and hundreds upon hundreds of short stories and essays. They can sell each one as a lucky find. The style will give it away as mine and my instructions will be to sell it for exactly ten times what it would fetch if I were alive.

What a gold mine for my survivors!

And what a pity I can't do it. I am accustomed, I am afraid, to getting all my material into print as soon as possible, because I like to see it in print, and I hate the thought of depriving myself of that innocent pleasure just to make my survivors filthy rich. Besides, I have the feeling that there is something unethical about deliberately piling up a huge mass of posthumous material, and then gouging the publishers and the public. I can't do it.

It may be, though, that you don't believe my stuff will be worth large sums under unusual circumstances. Well, listen to this. In January 1990, Doubleday published a limited edition of my first novel, *Pebble in the Sky,* to honor the fortieth anniversary of its appearance. They wanted to copy the first printing *exactly* and to make sure they did, they needed a copy of that first printing. They didn't have one, so they went out and bought one, at a second-hand bookstore, I presume.

The original first printing cost $2.50. The copy that Doubleday was forced to buy set them back a cool $300.00.

Hmm! What if I *pretend* to be dead and pile up the posthumous—

No, no! That would be even more unethical! ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have never written to someone like you before, but I wanted to thank you for all the years of pleasure you have given me. I am proud to say that I am a founding member of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. I enjoy your science articles as much as your fiction, and drop everything to watch any interviews of you that appear on TV. What is really great about you is your "down to earth" (if you will excuse the expression) attitude about yourself. You don't flaunt the fact that you are far above the rest of us in intelligence.

At one time in my life, I tried to make a living as a biochemist, physiologist, and genetic engineer. Somehow, I ended up as an IDSM/R database administrator. I have an observation about science fiction writing that has been bothering me. It seems that people who write about computers and programming are grievously lacking in experience. They may be very familiar with their Apple or word processor and assume that all computers work, and all software processes, like their own. So their writing contains statements like "He introduced himself to the computer." This asking for your name only occurs if the software you are using asks the operator for it. This introduction operation is common in some of the software written for the cheaper and smaller computers and is intended to help the novice feel more comfortable about using it.

Since my experience bridges micro, mini, and mainframe computers, I may be overly sensitive about the issue. But it seems to me that publishers need to get more involved with the authors when computers and software are part of the story, to keep the science in the stories more up to date. Please don't take this personally. This has not been a complaint about you or your magazine, just an observation.

Again, thank you for making my life much richer in spirit. I feel that I have seen the future through your eyes.

Very fondly yours,

Hazel Ethridge
Westminster, CO

The point is that I'm not *far above the rest of you in intelligence, so there's no point in my pretending I am. I just happen to have a small area of talent which I've learned to exploit ruthlessly, that's all.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been subscribing to your

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lovely science fiction magazine for a couple of years now and enjoy it very much. Since I've noticed you will often answer questions either in the letter section or your editorials I thought I would ask you a few questions.

One question pertains to the way you write your stories. Last year I had the opportunity of attending a conference where Ray Bradbury spoke—I was curious as to whether or not he actually knew the ending of his stories when he began writing them—or whether they were as entertaining for him to write as they were to read. He answered that he did NOT know the endings when he began and that was part of the excitement. (It was also identified as part energy or momentum which kept him moving towards the end—i.e., the overwhelming need to find out.) Obviously my question to you is: Do you know how your stories will end when you start them? I imagine you would have to know the endings for the mysteries you write because that is part of the formula and part of the mechanism in putting the puzzle together—but what about your science fiction/fantasy pieces?

My second question is aimed at an attempt to understand the parameters of the science fiction genre (if there are in fact any!) This is not meant to be criticism, but I have noted that at times there are stories in your magazine which do not seem to be science fiction. There was a simply wonderful werewolf story in your November or December 1988 issue and most recently in your July issue there is a story called "Boobs" which is also about werewolves. What makes this science fiction? Is it basically because it is in the realm of the *maybe* possible but still fantastic? I don't know the answer myself—but am curious.

Lastly, when I began subscribing to your magazine I didn't expect to get the added bonus of receiving consistently great art work as well as interesting and thought provoking stories. I feel like I am getting extra fudge on a hot fudge sundae! It's cool. Thank you for your time.

Shirley Guess
Santa Barbara, CA

To answer your questions: 1) I must know the end of a story before I start it. All my stories, whether mystery or not, must tend toward a particular climax or resolution, that I have to have in my mind from the start. 2) Gardner, who chooses the stories, does not strait-jacket them. If a story strikes him as particularly good, he does not mind if it's a little off-center where a strict definition of science fiction is concerned.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Today I finished three most interesting stories from the June issue of your magazine and I am quite happy having subscribed to it through a German importer. This was only my second issue of *IAsfm* but I'm looking forward to future numbers if I can find such moving stories like "Faith" by James Patrick Kelly, "The Dragon Line" by Michael Swanwick, and my favorite story "Enter A Soldier" by Robert Silverberg reminding me of his brilliant *Dying Inside*

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which I laid out of my hands with the feeling having read something bursting out of the frontiers of popular SF. The concept of putting people out of their times together is not done for the first time but my thanks to Mr. Silverberg for having taken a dream of the future ("real" A.I.) and finding common interests between so seemingly contrary people like Pizarro and Socrates. Their dialogue exceeds the familiar means of SF and enters a territory of philosophical questions about the human being and interpretations of god, forcing the reader to compare his own conception of faith and religion to the one in the story.

I see faith and hope for the future as the connection among the three stories. Mr. Kelly describes the insecurity of a suddenly betrayed woman after fifteen years of marriage and her ongoing search for happiness, until she finds new faith and meaning in her life, in a poetic and fairy-tale way. I enjoy believing in its outcome, full aware of it being too good to be true. And that counts. On the other hand have we Mr. Swanwick's uncompromising belief in science and Mordred's angry and hopeless fight for the world of the children are touching a hidden feeling deep inside. "Because even if the world can't be saved, we have to try." Hope is the energy driving us on. And Mordred has hope for the world, too.

If you enjoyed the story with Socrates as I did, I recommend for reading "oi dialogoi—the art of talking to each other" by Luciano De Crescenzo (translation not known), where Socrates says in our modern world his opinions about such things as television, traffic, and UFOs. It's worth it!

Thanks for publishing such a fine magazine.

Ciao

Gerwin Braun
Osterholtz-Scharmbeck
West Germany

PS: Sorry for my English. It's my first letter ever and it's right out of the belly. You know what I mean.

Your English sounds fine to me, except that we say, "right from the heart." Talking about Socrates, let me recommend I. F. Stone's The Trial of Socrates *where, for the first time, I found someone who agrees with me that Socrates should have been given the hemlock sooner.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been devouring the June and July issues, and I have to say (as if words have to be forced out of me) that I am delighted. The June issue is one of the best issues I have ever read.

My favorites in June were "The Tall Grass" by Steven Utley and "John Harper Wilson" by Allen M. Steele—the latter almost made me cry. Quite an accomplishment from a story that wasn't obviously trying to do so. The only story I wasn't quite satisfied with was Michael Swanwick's "The Dragon Line." It left a slightly bad taste in my mouth, somehow—probably because I read it two days after seeing a local theatre production of *Camelot.* Quite a contrast!

I feel also that I must comment on Baird Searles' June column. He

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mentioned the new covers on the paperback *Lord of the Rings* series, praising the new artwork of Michael Harring. Yet he said that even Harring failed to capture the hobbits' particular flavor of hobbitness. He suggested that "picturing hobbits is a lost cause." Not so! The brothers Greg and Tim Hildebrandt's 1976-78 J.R.R. Tolkien calendars were startlingly realistic and seemed to capture the images as if, I always imagined, they leapt from Tolkien's brain straight onto the canvas. The twin brothers were discovered by Ian and Betty Ballantine, who commissioned them initially for Tolkien illustrations; the brothers went on to illustrate Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* and other Ballantine books. They are still well-known fantasy illustrators, and personal favorites of mine. I think their hobbits are satisfyingly hobbity enough for anyone's tastes.

Enough about June—on to the July issue. The jewel of this particular crown was, for me, Suzy McKee Charnas' "Boobs"—that is, her *story* called "Boobs." It made me laugh (call me cold-blooded if you will—I was wholly sympathetic to the main character). I have now read two of her works and I am terribly impressed. But I have a question concerning her Nebula-winning novella, "Unicorn Tapestry." Was it by any chance a part of her novel, *The Vampire Tapestry* (best vampire story I ever read)? I lost my copy and have a poor memory for such things.

I have one more question before I let you off the hook. I seem to remember reading a story once by you, dear Doctor, about a robot named Andrew (I think) who became human. I can't remember where I read it—I've looked in all my old *IAsfm*'s and I can't find it anywhere. I'm beginning to think that I dreamed it all in the first place. Please tell me where to find it or if it exists at all, so that I'll know whether or not I'm insane.

Well, that's all I can think of to annoy you with, for now. One more word of praise, though; when my family's budget shrank dramatically last year, I was forced to drop all of my subscriptions (there were three) except for one—your superb magazine!

With fondest regards,

Andrea B. Stephens
H.C. 69 Box 615
Prestonsburg, KY 41653

The story of mine that you're thinking of is "The Bicentennial Man." It never appeared in any of the magazines but you'll find it in several of my collections, the latest being The Asimov Chronicles *(Dark Harvest, 1989). Mind you, I don't like to use this magazine to plug my own stuff, but you asked a question and I don't want you to think you're insane.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I like your magazine. There are always at least two things which I enjoy: your editorial and the letters to the editor.

Many issues contain only good stories; stories I like; stories which make me cry, or laugh, or think, or any combination of those.

Occasionally there is an issue containing little I like. Sometimes

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I read a story and wonder why I wasted my time. Once in a rare while I quit reading a story part way through simply because it did not appeal to me.

I have favorite authors but I don't automatically like everything they write. I prefer some types of science fiction and fantasy to others. I like poems.

Now that I've said all that, what's the point?

That I do not expect your magazine to present only what I like. That everyone who reads it should be open-minded enough to accept a wide range of story ideas and writing styles. That the established authors are fine but the new ones must be presented as well.

Some of the comments in past letters have amazed me. Arguments about what type of science fiction is best, or if fantasy should be in a science fiction magazine, or whether it is right to include sex and obscene language, have had me literally shaking my head. I thought we science fiction fans had thinking minds that could open up to other ideas, not necessarily to agree with them but at least to listen, and perhaps to learn.

I was astonished the first time you placed a warning at the beginning of a story, cautioning the reader that it contained possibly objectionable material. It is sad that a magazine aimed primarily at adults should decide such warnings are necessary. But then I thought about all those people out there who prefer to be told ahead of time that there might be something they don't like. Their sensibilities should be respected but not dictate what is published.

I would never want to see your editors decide against publishing a story simply because it contains some sex, violence, or obscene language. I know that would never happen because you and the rest of the staff believe censorship is the way of dictators.

I believe your editorial staff chooses what they feel are the best stories in terms of plot, writing skill, and all those intangibles editors use when deciding what to publish. If words and actions that some people may find inappropriate, are essential to the story line, then so be it; let the story live or die on its own merits.

Continue to provide the wide range of stories offered by your magazine and continue your fight against those narrow-minded people who are afraid to allow others to think for themselves or to have different ideas.

Sincerely,

Gloria Habart,
825 9th St. W., Apt. 303,
Owen Sound, Ont.
N4K 6A9
Canada

Well, thank you. I see you're on our side.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I want to thank whoever was responsible for selecting the werewolf story for the July 1989 *IAsfm*. It is a perfect story of a perfect revenge. Who of us has not wanted to do something like that to a bully. I loved the line: "Who would think that somebody as horrible as Billy Linden could taste so *good?*" The

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story was so absurd even the gory scenes were funny. I am looking forward with impatience to more stories by Suzy McKee Charnas.

I like humor in my science fiction and fantasy. One of my other favorite stories from a recent issue of your magazine was about an office of business people who turned into insects, including a woman who became a mosquito and developed an incredible hunger for her colleagues' blood. It was a delightful story. Give me humor over horror every time, and please give me more of it.

Thanks again for a magazine that I always look forward to and enjoy thoroughly.

Nancy J. Parker
Brewerton, NY

Have you ever read the stories of John Collier? He has a collection called Fancies and Goodnights *that you would love if you could find it somewhere. And meanwhile keep reading this magazine.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Long I have been an SF and fantasy enthusiast in both visual and written areas, yet it has been, until today, an often "lonely" hobby.

After reading your May '89 editorial, "Cosmopolitan," I felt compelled to write this and proclaim in a loud voice my belonging to the world's SF/fantasy community.

Being a fan in a third world country, always plagued with cultural taboos, can be very difficult even for a hardcore devotee; unavailability of material and the little (or may I say unexistent) consideration of the genre as a serious one always isolates and stereotypes even the most casual fan.

Far I see the day when while mentioning Tolkien's or Herbert's works they do not make the listener relate them to some tale their mother told them before sleeping.

Anyway, thanks for giving me a sense of fellowship, it feels like writing a letter to a country I left long ago.

Yanuly M. Sansón A.
Panamá, Panamá.

Welcome! You are one of us—as is everyone the world over who shares our interest in science fiction and the survival and progress of the human species.

—Isaac Asimov

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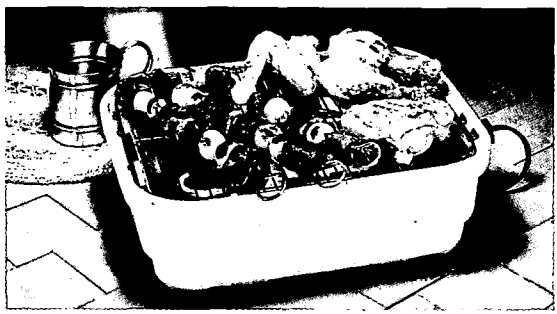

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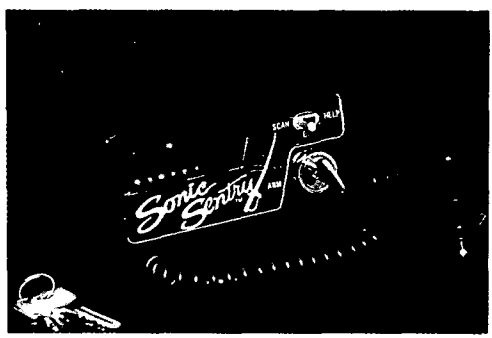

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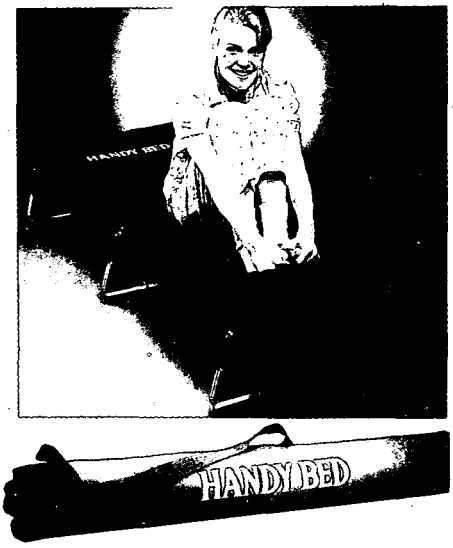

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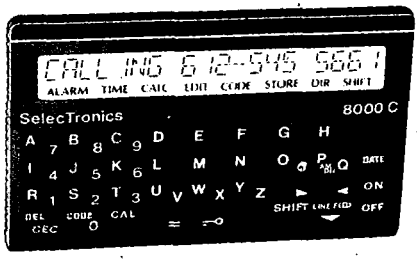

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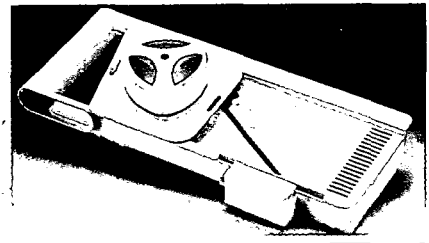

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

The other day I picked up *The Barsoom Project,* the sequel to Larry Niven and Steven Barnes's wonderful novel, *Dream Park.* And I'm eager to see what's new in Dream Park. You see, the first book made the real-life role-playing adventure of the park a dream for all game designers.

That's where we all want to go, one designer told me. And though the promise of CD-I, the interactive laser-read disc, is still just a promise, new computer-based technology continues to appear.

Nintendo's dominance of the dedicated game playing machine is being challenged in a significant way. Nintendo single-handedly resurrected the dead video-game and turned it into the leisure phenomenon of the 80s. SEGA eventually jumped in with their system, and even Atari returned to partake of the bounty. But the bulk of the purchases have been of the Nintendo NES, and the many "game-paks" produced by Nintendo and its 30-plus licensees.

That may all change. NEC (1255 Michael Drive, Wood Dale, IL 60191), one of the leading companies in electronics and communications including a very strong computer division, has introduced the Turbografx-16, a 16-bit machine versus Nintendo's 8-bit technology. The initial press demonstration featured side-by-side displays of the Nintendo NES and the Turbografx, highlighting the new machine's superior graphics and sound. And there looked like there might be problems ahead for Nintendo.

When my evaluation unit arrived, it was a black, sleek box, compact and unassuming despite the power of its 16-bit graphics processor. There's an expansion port on the T-shaped base for accessories such as a CD player that lets special discs interact with the game as well as displaying the graphics contained on the new CD+G compact discs. You can also plug in a TurboTap which lets up to five people play.

The initial games, *Keith Courage in Alpha Zones, Victory Run,* and *Legendary Axe,* cover familiar ground. *Keith Courage* is an adventure where you hop and fight your way to different levels, while *Legendary Axe* is a realistic fantasy action game. *Victory Run* is a reenactment of the Paris-Dakar road rally.

And at first I was a bit disappointed that the games were, well, familiar. There was nothing new

(Continued on page 190)

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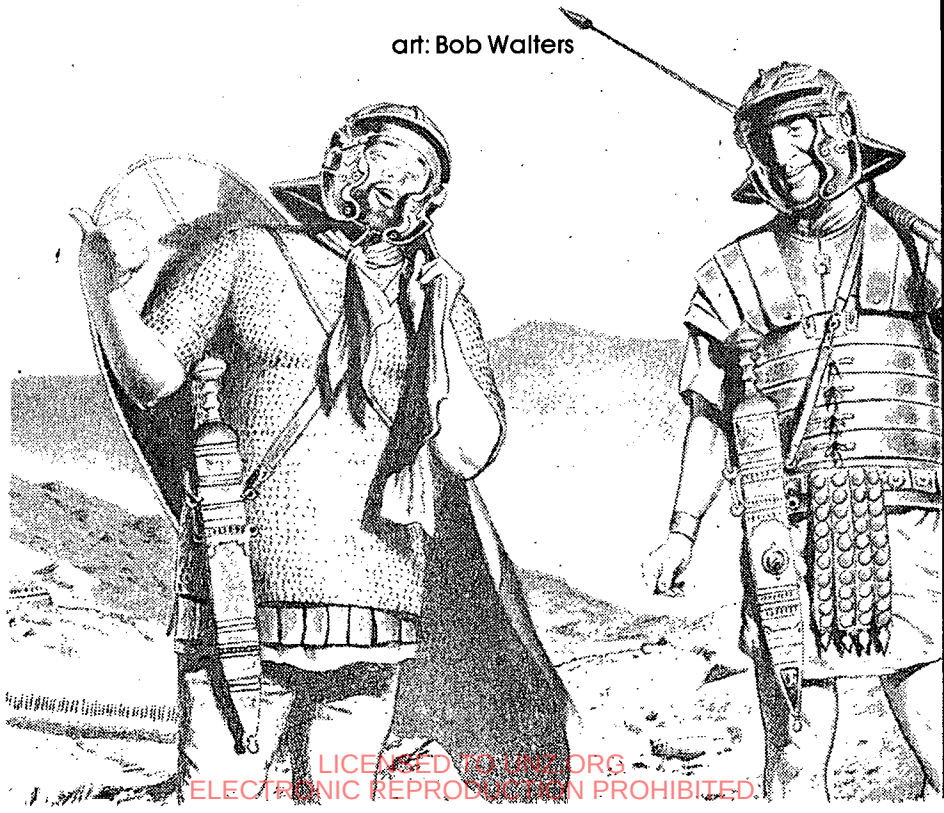
UP THE WALL

by Esther M. Friesner

Esther M. Friesner's most recent publications include *The Water King's Laughter* (Avon, Oct. 1989); *Demon Blues* (Ace, May 1989); *Sphynxes Wild* (NAL/Signet, May 1989); and *Hooray for Hellywood* (Ace, Jan. 1990). Ms. Friesner is currently working on a new fantasy trilogy for Ace Books and on a major new science fiction novel.

art: Bob Walters



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A gust of northcountry air swept over the undulating hump of Hadrian's Wall, still bearing with it the chill of the sea. The northcountry was the hard country—even the starveling sheep had the grim air of failed philosophers—but worse land yet lay north of the wall, in wild Caledonia, if the word of tribal Celts and travelers could be believed. Two figures in the full finery of the Roman legions paced the earthworks as dusk came on. The last rays of the setting sun struck gold from the breast of the eagle standard jammed into the soil between them. In looks, in bearing, in the solemn silence folded in wings around them, they carried a taste of eternity.

It all would have been very heroic and poetical if the shorter man had not reached up under his tunic and *pteruges*, undone his *bracae*, and taken a long, reflective pee in the direction of Orkney. His comrade affected not to notice.

Rather by way of distraction than conversation, the taller fellow broke silence almost simultaneously with his mate's breaking wind. In a good, loud, carrying voice he declaimed, "Joy to the Ninth, Caius Lucius Piso! The days of the beast are numbered. It shall be today that the hero comes; I feel it. This morning all the omens were propitious." He had the educated voice and diction a senator's son might envy. His Latin was high and pure, preserved inviolate even here, at the northernmost outpost of the legions. He turned to his mate. "What news from the south?"

"News?" his companion echoed. Then he placed a stubby tongue between badly chapped lips and blew a sound that never issued from the wolf's-head bell of any bucina. "Sweet sodding Saturn, Junie, how the blazes would *I* have any more news from the friggin' south than you, stuck up here freezin' me cobblers off, waitin' on the relief—see if *them* buggers ever show up, bleedin' arse-lickers the lot of 'em, and everyone knows Tullius Cato's old lady's been slippin' into the commander's bedroll, so *he* never pulls the shit-shift, wish *my* girl'd show half as much support for me career, but that's women for you—only women ain't so much to your taste, now as I remember the barrack-room gab, are they, no offense taken, I hope?"

His Latin was somewhat less pure than that of his hawk-faced comrade-in-arms.

Junius Claudius Maro regarded the balding, podgy little man with a look fit to petrify absolutely that fellow's already chilled cobblers. "You presume too much upon our training days, Caius Lucius Piso. Were I to report the half of what you have just said, our beloved commander could order the flesh flayed from your bones." He settled the drape of his thick wool mantle more comfortably on his shoulders, then suffered a happy afterthought: "With a steel-tipped knout. However, for the love that is

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between us, I will say nothing." He looked inordinately pleased with himself.

"Right, then," said Caius Lucius Piso. His own afterthought bid him add: "Ta." He uprooted the Imperial eagle, hoisted it fishpole-wise over one shoulder, and casually commenced a westerly ramble. "I'll just be toddling on down the wall, eh? Have a bit of a lookabout? Keep one peeper peeled for this hero fella you say's coming, maybe kindle a light, start a little summat boiling on the guardroom fire, hot wine, the cup that cheers, just the thing what with a winter like we're like to have, judging by the misery as's crept into me bones. Bring you back a cuppa, Junie?" This last comment was flung back from a goodly distance down the wall, went unheard, and received no reply.

The nearest guardroom along that section of the wall where the ill-matched pair patrolled had once been a thing of pride, to judge by its size. It was large enough to have housed sheep, for whatever purpose. Years and neglect had done their damnedest to bring pride to a fall. Hares and foxes took it in turn to nest in the tumbledown sections of the derelict structure, but there was still a portion of the building with a make-do roof of old blankets and sod. In the lee of the October winds, surrounded by shadows, Caius Lucius Piso knelt to poke up the small peat fire in the pit.

The flame caught and flared, banishing darkness. Caius gasped as his small fire leaped in reflection on the iron helmet and drawn sword of the man hunkered on his hams in the dingy guardroom. The image of a slavering wild boar cresting his helmet seemed to leap out at the trembling Roman. Beneath the brim, two small, red, and nasty orbs glared. From porcine eyes to bristly snout, there was a striking family resemblance between boar crest and crest-wearer.

There was also the matter of the man's sword. Caius Lucius Piso's initial impression of that weapon had not been wrong. It was indeed as large, keen, and unsheathed as it had seemed at first glance. It was also leveled at the crouching Roman. The man snarled foreign words and raised the sword several degrees, sending ripples through his thickly-corded forearm muscles. Many of his teeth were broken, all were yellow as autumn crocus, and the stench emanating from him, body and bear-skin, was enough to strike an unsuspecting passer-by senseless. He looked like a man to whom filth was not just a way of life, but a religious calling.

Caius Lucius Piso knew a hero when he saw one.

"Oh, *shit*," he said.

"*That's* him?" Goewin knotted her fists on her hips and studied the new arrival. "*That's* our precious hero?"

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"Hush now, dear, he'll hear you." Caius Lucius Piso made small dampening motions with his hands, but the lady of his hearth and heart was undaunted. She had been the one who'd taught him how to make that obnoxious tongue-and-lips blatting sound, after all.

"Hush yerself, you great cowpat. Who cares *does* he hear me? Stupid clod don't speak a *fly*speck of honest Gaelic." She smiled sweetly at the visitor, who stood beside the oxhide-hung doorway, arms crossed. He appeared to disapprove of everything he saw within the humble hut, and, without a word, somehow conveyed the message that he had sheathed his fearsome sword under protest.

"Who'd like a bit of the old nip-and-tuck with any ewe he fancies, then?" Goewin asked him, still smiling. "Whose Mum did it for kippers?"

"Goewin, for Mithra's sake, the man's a guest. *And* a hero! He's only biding under our roof until they're ready to receive him formally at headquarters."

"*Hind*quarters, you mean, if it's the Commander yer speaking of."

"Epona's east tit, woman, mind your tongue! If word gets back to the commander that you've been rude to his chosen hero . . ." Caius Lucius turned chalky at the thought.

"A *hero?*" Goewin cocked her head at the impassive presence guarding her doorway. *"Him?"* She clicked her tongue. "If *that's* the sort of labor we're down to bringing into Britain, just to take care of a piddling beast *you* lot could handle, weren't you such hermaphros, *well*—"

"That's not fair and you know it, Goewin. You can't call a monster big enough to carry off five legionaries any sort of piddler."

"Oh, pooh. 'Tisn't as if it carried all five off in one go. I've not seen it anymore than you have, but I know different. You Romans *always* exaggerate, as many a poor girl's learned to her sorrow on the wedding night or 'round the Beltaine fires. Probably no more'n a newt with glanders, but straightaway you lot bawl 'Dragon!' and off for help you run. Bunch of babes. And if *that* piece propping up the doorpost's the best you could drum up on the Continent—" She shrugged expressively. "This country's just going to ruin, Cai, that's all." She slouched over to grasp the stranger's impressive left bicep. "Look 'ee here. Shoddy goods, that is. Scrawnier than—"

There was a flicker of cold steel. The man's dagger was smaller than his sword, lighter, far handier, with a clean line that would never go out of style. It was almost the size of a Roman legionary's shortsword, but he handled it with more address. Presently it addressed Goewin's windpipe.

"*Ave*, all," said Junius, pulling back the oxhide and stepping unwittingly into the midst of this small domestic drama. "The commander is now prepared to greet our noble visitor with all due—"

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The noble visitor growled something unintelligible and dropped his dagger point from Goewin's throat. Caius Lucius rather supposed that his guest disliked interruptions. Junius stared as the blade turned its attention to him.

"Now just a moment—" Junius objected in his flawless Latin.

A moment was all Caius Lucius wished. His wife was safe, but now his messmate was in danger. Dragon or no, and never mind that Junie Maro was the biggest prig the Glorious Ninth had ever spawned, the bonds of the legion still stood for *some*thing. While trying to remember precisely what, he picked up a small wine jug and belted the noble visitor smack on top of his iron boar.

Junius Claudius Maro looked down at the crumpled heap of clay shards, fur, and badly-tanned leather at his feet, then gave Caius Lucius a filthy glare by way of thanks for his life. "You *idiot*," he said.

"You're welcome, I'm sure," Caius replied. Sullen and bitter, he added, "Didn't kill 'im. Didn't even snuff his wick."

That much was true. The man was not unconscious, just badly dazed and grinning like a squirrel. Caius Lucius watched, astounded, as old Junie knelt beside the stunned barbarian and spoke to him in a strange, harsh tongue. Still half loopy, the man responded haltingly in kind, and before long the two of them were deep in earnest conversation punctuated by bellowing laughter.

"You—you *speak* that gibberish, Junie?" Caius Lucius ventured to ask when his comrade finally stood up.

"*Geatish*, not gibberish," Junius replied, wiping tears of hilarity from his eyes. "Gods, and to think I never believed the *pater* when he told me it's the only tongue on earth fit for telling a really *elegant* latrine joke! Later on, you must remind me to tell you the one about—but no. The pun won't translate, and, in any case, Ursus here says he's going to kill you in a bit. If our commander doesn't have you crucified first, for nearly doing in our dragon-slayer."

Caius Lucius gaped. *"Crucified?"*

His wife sighed. "Didn't me Mum just *warn* me you'd come to a bad end. Now I'll have to listen to the old girl's bloody I-told-you-so's 'til Imbolc. *Honestly*, Cai—!"

"Caius Lucius Piso, you are accused of damaging legion property." The Commander of the Ninth slurped an oyster and gave the accused the fish-eye. "This man has been brought into our service at great *personal* expense to deal with our—ah—little problem, and you make free with his cranial integrity." The commander grinned, never loath to let his audience know when he'd come up with an especially elegant turn of

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phrase. Marcus Septimus, the commander's secretary, toady, and emergency catamite, applauded dutifully and made a note of it.

"Bashed him one on the conk, he did," Goewin piped up from the doorway. "I *saw* 'im!"

Caius could not turn to give his wife the killing look she deserved. He was compelled to stand facing his commander, head bowed, and hear Goewin condemn him with one breath, then, with the second, titter, "Oooh, Maxentius, you keep your hands to *yourself*, you horrid goat! And me not even a widow yet!" Her pleased tone of voice belied her harsh words. Obviously, Goewin did not believe in waiting until the last minute to provide for her future.

Caius scuffed his already worn *perones* in the packed earthen floor of the commander's hut, and tried to think of something besides death. It didn't help to dwell on the thought of killing old Junie, for that specific fantasy always veered over to the general theme of *thanatos*, which by turns yanked his musings back to his own imminent fate. The commander was not happy, and all the way back to the first generation, the Commanders of the Ninth had had a simple way of dealing with their discontent.

"Right. Guilty. Crucify him," said the commander.

Junius looked smug. He stood at the commander's left hand while the man he had dubbed Ursus sprawled on a bench to the right. He still wore the boar's head helm, but now the eyes beneath the brim no longer showed murderous rage. Instead they roved slowly around the hut, silently weighing the worth and transportability of every even vaguely valuable item they spied. They only paused in their mercantile circuit when Junius leaned around the back of the commander's chair to whisper a translation of Caius' sentence in the barbarian's shaggy ear.

Something like a flint-struck spark kindled in the depths of those tiny eyes. *"NEVER!"* Ursus bawled—and then all Hades broke loose.

Afterwards, Caius could not say whether he was more shocked by the barbarian's reaction, or by the fact that he had understood the man's exclamation precisely.

He quickly shelved linguistic musings in favor of survival. It really *was* an impressive tantrum the barbarian was throwing; he also threw the bench. Everyone in the commander's hut who could reach an exit, did so, in short order. The commander and all members of the makeshift tribunal held their ground, but only because they were cut off from the sole escape route by the rampaging dragon-slayer himself.

Ursus was on his feet, each clenched fist the size of a toddler's skull. He gave a fierce kick, knocking over a little tabouret bearing a bowl of windfalls and a silver wine jug with matched goblets. He picked up the fallen objects one by one and flung them at the hut's curved walls. Though

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his sword and dagger had perforce been laid aside before coming into the commander's presence, he still looked able to reduce the population barehanded *ad libitum*. Throughout this demonstration, he continued to chant, "Never, never, *never!*"

The commander's face resembled an adolescent cheese. His jowls shuddered as much as his voice when he inquired so very delicately of his guest, "What? *Never?*"

When Junius went to translate this into Geatish, the hero siezed him by the throat and shook him until his kneecaps rattled. He pitched the Roman javelin-fashion at the open doorway of the commander's house. Unfortunately, he missed his aim by a handspan. Junius came up face-first against a doorpost and knocked one of the severed heads out of its niche. The commander's woman, a hutproud lady, fussed loudly as she dusted it off and tucked it back where it belonged.

Junius received no such attentions.

Ursus glowered at the fallen foe.

"Far though my fate has flung me,
Weary the whale-road wandering,
Still shall I no stupidity stomach,
Butt and baited of boobies!"

All this he spat at his retired translator. He used a sadly corrupt version of Latin, admixed higgledy-piggledy with a sprinkling of other tongues. Like most bastards, it had its charm, and was able to penetrate where purebreds could not follow. It took some concentration, but every man of the Ninth who heard Ursus speak so, understood him.

Caius took a tentative step towards his unexpected champion. "You haven't half got a bad accent, mate. For a bloody foreigner, I mean. Pick up the tongue from a trader, then?"

Ursus' eyes narrowed, making them nigh invisible. He motioned for Caius to approach, and when the little man complied, he grabbed him and hoisted him onto tip-toe by a knot of tunic.

"Hear me, O halfling halfblood,
Lees of the legion's long lingering
Here hard by Hadrian's human-reared hillock!
Your lowly life I love not.
Murder you might I meetly,
Yet you are young and useful.
Wise is the woman-born warrior
Dragons who dauntless dares;
Smarter the soul who sword-smites serpents
Carefully, in company of comrades."

Caius was still puzzling this out when Marcus Septimus inched up

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behind him and whispered, "I think he wants a sword-bearer or something to stand by while he does in the dragon for us."

"Want *my* opinion," Caius growled out of the corner of his mouth, "the bugger's just as scared as the rest of us. Sword-bearer, my arse! What he wants is *bait!*"

"We could still crucify you," Marcus suggested.

Caius got his hands up and delicately disengaged the barbarian's hold on his tunic. Once there was solid earth under his feet again, he said, "All right, Ursus. You've got me over the soddin' barrel. I'll go."

Everyone left in the hut smiled, including Junius, who had just rejoined the sentient.

Ursus clapped the little legionary on the shoulder and declaimed: "Victory velcomes the valiant!"

Marcus raised one carefully-plucked brow and clucked. " 'Velcomes?' Hmph. If they're going to come over here and take our coin, they might at *least* learn to speak our language properly!"

"Silly Geat," Junius agreed, rubbing his head.

Ursus was neither deaf nor amused, and his smattering of Latin was enough to parse personal remarks. He gathered up the two critics as lesser men might pick strawberries. Marcus cast an imploring glance at the commander, who was suddenly consumed by a passion to get to know his toenails better.

"Sagas they sing of swordsmen," Ursus informed them.

"Hymn they the homicidal.
Geats, though for glory greedy,
Shame think it not to share.
Wily, the Worm awaits us.
Guides will I guard right gladly!
And, should the shambler slay you,
Sorrow shall I sincerely."

Caius leered at the two wriggling captives. "In other words, gents, we've *all* been bloody drafted."

"Oh, I hate this, hate this, *hate this*," Marcus whined as they trudged along Hadrian's Wall, fruitlessly trying to keep pace with Ursus.

"Put a *caliga* in it, you miserable cow! It's not like he'd tapped *you* to be his weapons bearer." Caius gave Marcus an encouraging jab with the bundle of spears that had been wished on him by his new boss. "All *you've* got to do is lead him to the fen where the monster's skulking and take off once the fun starts. Shouldn't be too hard for you."

"We're all going to *die*," Marcus moaned. "The dragon will be all stirred up, and it will slay that great brute before you can say *hic ibat Simois*,

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and then it will come after *us*. I can't outrun a dragon! Not in *these* shoes."

At the head of the line where he marched beside Ursus, a spare eagle standard jouncing along on his shoulder, Junius overheard and gave them a scornful backwards glance. He said something that Caius did not quite catch, but which caused Marcus to make an obscene gesture.

"Soddin' ears going on me," Caius complained. "What'd he say, then?"

"*That*—" Marcus pursed his ungenerous mouth "—was *Greek*."

"Greek to *me*, all right," Caius agreed. "Junie always was a bloody show-off."

"He said we were both slackers and cowards, and when we get back and he tells the Commander how badly we've disgraced the Glorious Ninth in front of the hired help, we'll both be crucified."

"Not *that* again." Caius shifted the spears. "I'm fucking sick and tired of Junie and his thrice-damned crucifixions. Mithra, it's like a bally religion with him. What's he need to get off, then? A handful of sesterce spikes and a mallet?"

"He also said that he was going to warn Arctos to keep a weather eye on us so we don't bolt."

Caius flung down his bundle, exasperated. "*Now* who's been wished on us for this little deathmarch, eh? Bad enough we're to split two men's rations four ways—sod the commander for a stone-arsed miser—but who's this fifth wheel coming to join us?"

The clatter of falling spears made the rest of the party draw up short. Marcus was totally bewildered. "*What* fifth wheel?"

"This Arctos bastard who'll be baby-minding us, that's who!" Caius shouted.

Junius regarded the angry little man with disdain. "I will thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking of our *pro tempore* commander, Caius Lucius Piso." He then turned to the barbarian and added, "Do not kill him yet, O august Ursus. We still need him to carry the spears."

"Arctos *is* Ursus, Cai, old boy," Marcus whispered. "Greek, Latin, same meaning, same name. So sorry if I confused you. The drawbacks of a really good classical education." He tittered behind his hand.

"Sod off," Caius growled, gathering up the armory.

It was some three days later that the little group finally stepped off on the northern side of the Wall and reached their goal. Gray and brown and thoroughly uninviting, the fen stretched out before them. Mist lay thick upon the quaking earth. A few scraggly bushes, their branches stripped of foliage, clung to the banks of the grim tarn like the clutching hands of drowning men going under for the last time.

"—and the best freshwater fishing for miles about." Caius sighed as

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he viewed the haunt of their watery Nemesis. "If the commander wasn't half such a great glutton, we could leave the fish to the dragon and eat good boiled mutton like honest folk. But *no*. Off he goes, filling our ears with endless, colicky speeches about the honor of the Ninth and all that Miles Gloriosus codswallop, when the *truth* is that he just fancies a sliver of stuffed pike now and again. So in he brings this hero fella, and now our lives aren't worth a tench's fart."

"I heard that!" Junius called. "And when the commander finds out—"

"Junie, love, why don't you go nail your balls to a board?" Marcus Septimus remarked over-sweetly.

Caius patted the former secretary on the back. "You know, Marc, old dear, you're not a bad sort for a catamite."

The barbarian directed his helpers to pitch camp, which they did in swift, efficient, legion fashion. Despite their internal bickerings, proper training made them work well together. Even Marcus did not manage to get too badly underfoot. When the lone tent was pitched and dinner on the boil, Caius flopped down on the damp ground without further ceremony.

"Oh, me aching back! Mithra knows how many friggin' *milia pasuum* we've covered, and for what? Just so's we'd be on time to be ate tomorrow morning!"

A gaunt shadow fell across his closed eyes. "Get up, Caius Lucius Piso," Junius said, using the tip of his foot to put some muscle behind the order. "The food is ready and we can't find Ursus anywhere."

"Can't we now?" Caius did not bother to open his eyes. "Here's me heart, bleeding like a stuck pig over the news. Run off, has he? Jupiter, I never figured the big ox to have a fraction so much sense as *that*. Commander shouldn't've paid him in advance."

"He was paid nothing." Junius' words were as dry as Goewin's onion tart. "Nor has he run off. Ursus is a *hero*."

"Says who? Himself?"

Junius tucked his hands tightly into the crooks of his elbows. "Our commander is not without his sources of information, nor would he engage such an important hireling blind. He heard nothing but the most sterling reports of our man's prowess at disposing of supernumerary monsters. Granted, the fellow's one of those Ultima Thule types who hails from where they've the better part of the year to work on polishing their lies for the spring trade, but even discounting a third of what they say he's done—"

Caius made that blatting sound again.

"In any case, our noble commander is not the sort to make a bad bargain, and were he to hear *you* so much as *implying* that he might, he would—"

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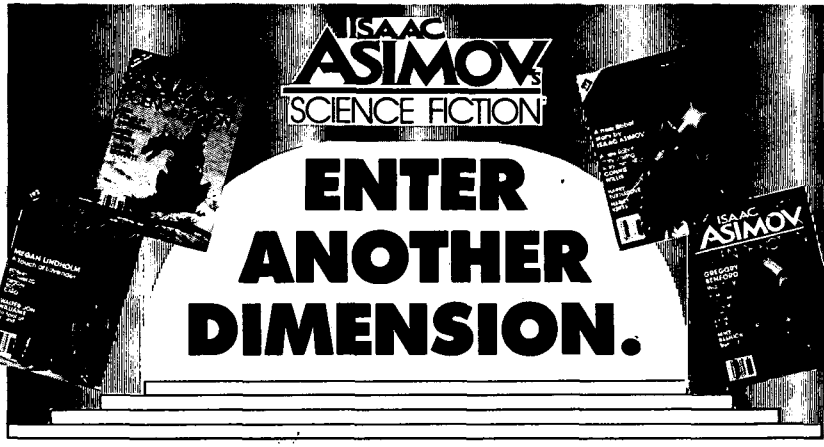

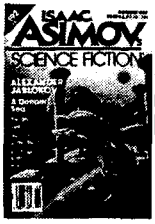

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"Yes, yes, I know, crucify me." Caius forced himself to stand. "I'll go fetch 'im, then, before you get yer hands all over calluses from nailing me up."

Caius didn't have far to go before he found his temporary leader. The barbarian squatted on a little hummock of high ground overlooking the fen, his sword jammed into a large, moldy-looking log some short distance away. His helmet was off, propped upside-down between his ankles, and his left hand kept dipping into it, then traveling to his mouth. Caius smelled a penetrating sweetness above the fetid reek of the marshland.

"Hail, heart-strong helper!" Ursus beamed at the little Roman. Viscous golden brown strands dripped from his beard and moustache.

"Hail yerself," Caius replied. He sauntered up the hummock and scrooched down beside the barbarian. "Got something good, have we?" He peered into the upended helm.

Ursus nodded cheerfully, his expression miraculously purged of any bloodlust. He jerked one thumb at the log, while with the other hand he shoved the helmet at Caius.

"Hollow this harvest's home,
Fallen the forest friend
Ages ago, several seasons spent.
Rotten and rent, core and root,
Toppled to turf the tall tree.
Gilded the gliding gladiators,
Plying their pleasant pastime,
Sweetness sun-gold instilling,
Honey they heap in hives.
Noisy their nest they name,
Daring and daunting dastards,
Stabbing with stings to startle
Thieves that their treasure try taking.
Came then the conquering caller,
Scorning their scabrous squabbles,
Their dire drones disdaining,
Helping himself to honey.
Right were the runes they wrought
When saw he first the sunlight,
Bidding the birthed boy Bee-wolf
Never another name know."

"Boy? Who gave birth to what boy hereabouts?" Caius' eyes darted about suspiciously.

The barbarian struck his own chest a fearsome thump.

"Oh." Caius dipped into the honey. Through gummy lips he added, "Going on about yerself, then, were you?"

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The barbarian bobbed his head eagerly.

"Nice bit o' puffery, that. Bee-wolf, eh? That'd be yer common or garden variety bear, ain't it? So that's why Junie stuck you with Ursus, leave it to *him* not to have more imagination than a badger's bottom. Kind of a circumlocutionariatory way to go about naming a sprat, don't ask *me* why you'd want yer kid associated in decent folks' minds with a horrid great smelly beast what hasn't the brains of a turnip, though it does make for a tasty stew, especially *with* a turnip or two, gods know *I* hope you didn't smell like one from the minute you were born—a bear, I mean, not a turnip; *nor* a stew—but you can't bloody tell about foreigners, now can you? Never one word where twenty'll do, no offense taken, I hope?"

Bee-wolf nodded, still grinning. His find of wild honey had sweetened his temper amazingly well.

" 'Course, not that a name like that don't have its poetry to it, mate. A man needs a bit of poetry in his life now and again." Caius chewed up a fat hunk of waxy comb and spat dead bees into the fen with casual accuracy. " 'Mongst my Goewin's folk—Goewin's the jabbery little woman you came near to filleting with yer dagger—they keep a whole *stable* of bards plumped up just to natter on about how this chief slew that one and made off with his cattle. It's a wonder to me the poor beasties have a bit o' flesh left on their bones, the way those mad Celts keep peaching 'em back and forth, forth and back, always on the move. Savagery, *I* call it; not like us Romans. Compassionate, we are—one of the refinements of civilization. Cruelty to dumb brutes makes me want to spew."

Caius leaned forward, encouraged to this intimacy by the barbarian's continued calm. "Now if it were up to *me*," he confided, "I'd leave this poor soddin' dragon alone, I would. Live and let live, I say—that's the civilized way to go about it. It's not as though he's ate up more'n *five* of our men, after all, and we've just got guesses to go by even for that. Only one witness ever come back to tell us it *were* the dragon for certain as ate 'em, or even *was* they ate, and *that* man was our *signifer* Drusus Llyr, what no one knew his parents was first cousins 'til it was too late, and *he* died stark bonkers that very night. You want me considered opinion, them fellers went over the Wall, they did, fed up to their gizzards with the commander and the whole glorious Ninth fucking Legion." He drew a deep sigh. "Can't say as I blame 'em. Can't even rightly say as I wouldn't do the same."

Ursus looked puzzled.

"Came the commander's call.
Summoning my sword to serve him.
Nobly the Ninth he named,
Home and haven of heroes."

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"Arr, that's just recruitment blabber." Caius waved it all aside. "Lot of fine talk, all of it slicker than goose shit, just to rope in the young men as are half stupid, half innocent, and t'other half ignorant, no offense meant. Once in a while he manages to gammon a few of the local brats into uniform, but mostly it's sons of the legion following in their Da's footsteps because a camp upbringing's ruined 'em for honest work stealing cattle. Na, the Ninth's not what she used to be."

"When, I do wistful wonder,
Was this, thy lonesome legion
More than a muddle of men
Prowling the piddling plowlands,
Wandering the Wall's wide way?"

"Wozzat? Oh, I get yer. Well, truth to tell—" Caius leaned in even closer and nearly rested his elbow in the honey "—I haven't the foggiest. See, mate, *used* to be as the Ninth was as fine a lot of pureblood Roman soldiers as ever you'd fancy—and didn't our commander just! But then, well . . . you know as how *things* have this narsty way of just . . . *happening*, like?"

"Fate do I fear not.
Still, circumstances stun stalwarts.
Here, have more honey."

Caius did so. "Like I been saying, what with the wild upcountry folk the Ninth was first sent here to deal with, always on the march, camp here today, there tomorrow, try to keep the Celtic chieftains in line or even learn to tell 'em *apart* one from the other, and what with the odd carryings-on back home in dear old Roma Mater, inside the city, out in the provinces, up 'crost the German frontier with them as must be yer kissin' cousins, Saxons and Goths and that lot, *well*, in comes one rosy-fingered dawn and gooses our then-commander with the fact that there ain't no orders come through from Rome or even Londinium to tell us arse from elbow. No *orders*, mate! You know what *that* means to a professional soldier and bureaucrat like our commander?"

"No, that knowledge I know not."

"Small wonder you would, you being a hero and all. Stand up for yerself, do what you like, go where the fancy takes you. But *regular army?* We don't dare take a *shit* without proper orders to wipe off with after. So when there *wasn't* none coming through, we dug in where we was, up by the Wall, took up with the local ladies, bred our boys to the Legion and our girls to bribe any tribes we couldn't beat in a fair fight, and we waited." Caius rested his face on one hand, forgetting it was the one he'd been using to dip into Ursus' helmet. "We're still waiting, man and boy, father to son, can't *tell* you how bloody long it's been."

The barbarian tilted his helmet and slurped out the last of the plun-

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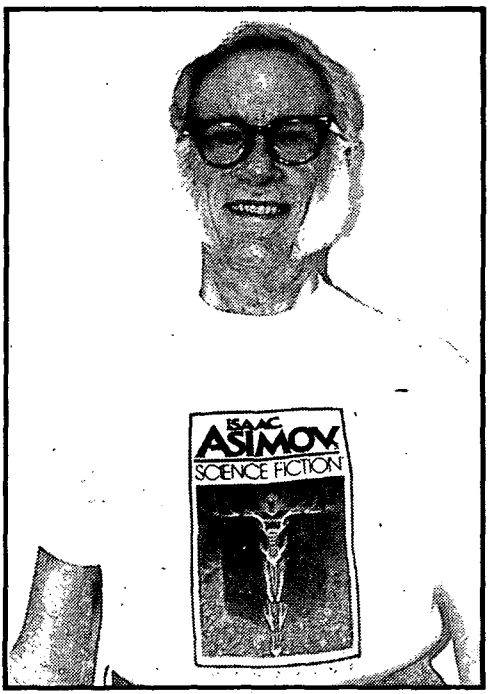

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dered honey. He wiped his gooey whiskers on the back of an equally hairy forearm, then said:

"Strangely this strikes me as scoop-skulled.
Why do you wait and wonder?
Beneath your brows lurk brains or bran?
Sit you thus centuries? Shitheads."

Caius made a hand-sign that translated across any number of cultures. "Look, mate, so long as our bleedin' commander, latest in a long line of Imperially-appointed shitheads, has got more than three like old Junie there to lick his tail and say *please, sir, what's for afters?* it's no use running off. There's precious little as *is* to keep the men occupied. Hunting down a deserter'd be a rare treat for any of 'em. And it's as much as me life's worth to speak up and say let's break camp and head south like sensible folk, try to scare up some news from Rome as isn't staler than week-old pig piss. See, so long as we're up *here*, our commander's the law. Go *south*, and he could find out that the only thing he's got a right to control is his own bladder, and not too strict a say over *that*. So if a man's fool enough to suggest a move off the Wall, 'Orders is orders,' he'd say, 'and traitors is traitors. And we of the Glorious Ninth know what to do with *traitors*, don't we, Junie, me proud beauty?' "

"Crudely crucify the creatures," Ursus supplied.

"You're not just talking through yer helmet there, mate," Caius agreed. "Speaking of which, it's in a proper mess. Give 'er here to me, and you go fetch that boar-sticker of yours out of the log. We'll have a proper wash-up—me for the helmet, you for the blade, before she rusts silly, doesn't anybody ever teach you barbarians respect for a good bit of steel?—then we'll go back to camp and get some oil for the pair of 'em. Supper's ready, and if we let it go to the bad, Junie'll be off crucifying us left and right again."

"Dares he the deed to do,
Sooner my sword shall steep its steel,
Blood-drinker, blade and brother,
Entirely in his entrails."

Caius took up the helmet, beaming. "You're a decent sort, Bee-wolf, for a bleedin' hero." He toddled down the slope to rinse out the helmet.

As he squatted to his task in the shallows, a tuneless ditty on his lips, a loud, wet, crunch hard by his right foot made him start and keel over into the murky water. The helmet went flying out over the fenland, landing with an echoing *plop* in a nearby pool.

Junius Claudius Maro leaned hard on the eagle standard and observed the helm's trajectory with a critical eye. "*Now* you shall not escape punishment, Caius Lucius Piso."

"*Punishment?*" Caius spluttered, scarcely feeling the cold water that

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seeped through his clothes. Rage kept him warm. "After *you* was the one as scared the *bracae* off me, sneaking up and chunking that whopping great standard into the sqd like you was trying to spit me foot with it?" He picked himself up out of the shoreline muck and hailed the hummock. "Oi! Bee-wolf! You saw him do that, didn't you? You saw as it wasn't no fault of *mine* that your helmet—"

But Bee-wolf was not paying attention to the angry little Roman. He stood on the high ground, honey still gumming his beard, and stared out across the fen to the spot where his boar-crest helmet had gone down. He made no move to yank his sword free of the fallen log where it still stood wedged in the heart of the ruined beehive. Something in the barbarian's sudden pallor and paralysis stilled Caius' own tongue. From the corner of one eye, he saw that Junie was likewise rapt with terror. He did not *want* to see what had frightened them so, but, at last, look he did.

The fen bubbled. The slimy surface heaved. Slowly, seemingly as slender as a maiden's arm, a snakey form broke the face of the stagnant water. On and on it came, climbing ever higher into the clear air, until Caius thought that there simply could *not* be any more to come without ripping reality wide open and sending all the world plunging down into the gods' own nightmares. He was only half aware of the eagle standard toppling over into the mud as Junie whirled and fled. This sudden movement galvanized the lazily rising length of serpentine flesh. The spade-shaped head darted within arm's length of Caius, ignoring the petrified little man as if he were part of the scenery. A maw lined with needle-like teeth gaped open, impossibly wide, and sharp jaws clamped shut around Junie, hauberk, shriek, and all.

"Oh, I *say!*" Caius exclaimed, as his comrade's scream knocked his own tongue free. Automatically, he stooped to retrieve the fallen standard, then turned to the hummock and bawled, "*There's* your bloody fen-monster, Bee-wolf, old boy! Do for 'er now while she's busy with poor Junie and you've got surprise on yer . . ." His words dribbled away.

The high ground was bare, the hero nowhere to be seen.

"*Coward!*" came Marcus' angry shout from the direction of camp. "You pusilanimous, recreant, craven, dastardly, caitiff—Oooooh, you *rabbit*, come back with Cai's *sword!*" The commander's secretary came stomping into sight of the fen just as the monster commenced reeling in a struggling Junie.

Caius heard Macus's yips of shock blend nicely with Junie's continued screaming and blubbering. The dragon was imperturbable, allowing the bulk of his still-submerged and leisurely sinking body to drag his prize into the fen. Caius watched as span after span of sequentially decreasing

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neck slipped past him. It would not be long before Junie followed, down into the fen, without so much as a last *vale* for his old messmate.

"Bloody foreigners," Caius grumbled, and, raising the eagle standard high, he brought it crunching down as hard as he was able, just at the moment when the monster's head came by.

BONK.

The dragon froze, its wicked mouth falling open. Junius flopped out. He wasted no time in questioning deliverance, but hauled his body free. He was breathing hoarsely—no doubt he had a rib or two the worse for wear—but he was able to pull himself a little ways up the shore.

Caius smashed the beast in the head again with the eagle of the Ninth, putting all his weight in it. He and Junie looked at each other. "One bloody word out of you about damaging legion property, Junie," he shouted, "and it's back in the fen I'll toss you myself!"

"Not a word, not one!" Junie wheezed, pulling himself farther up the bank. Marcus came running down, holding his tunic well out of the mud, and tried to hoist the injured man without soiling himself. It was an impossible endeavor.

"Cai, leave that horrid creature alone and come here *right now* and help me with Junius!" he called. "Go on, let it be, it's had enough."

"Stop yer gob, will you?" Caius was panting with the effort of using the legion standard as a bludgeon, but he lofted it for a third blow anyhow. "If this bugger's just stunned, *I'm* nearest, and I'll be twigged if I'll be the tasty pud to tempt an invalid monster's palate when it comes to. Not just to keep *your* tunic clean, Missy Vestal!"

"Well, who died and made *us* Jupiter Capitolinus?" With a peeved sniff, Marcus slung Junie's arm around his neck, letting the mud slop where it would. "If you're still speaking to the *plebs*, Cai, we'll be back in camp." He hustled Junie out of sight without waiting to see the eagle descend for the third time.

The beast had been hissing weakly, but the final smash put paid to that. There was a sickening crunch that Caius felt all the way up his arms to his shoulders, and then it was no longer possible to tell where the monster's skull ended and the bogland began. Caius wiped his sweating brow, getting honey all over his face. "*That's* done," he said, "and damned if anyone'll credit it. Goewin won't, for one; not without proof, and that means the head." He felt for his sword, then remembered that not only had he left it in camp, but the barbarian had made off with it.

"Vesta's smoking hole!" He thrust the standard deep into the sodden ground, cradling it in the crook of one arm as he raised cupped hands to lips and bellowed, "Oi! Marcus! Fetch me back Junie's sword when yer at a loose end, there's a dear!" He waited. Not even an echo returned.

Caius called again, then another time, until he felt a proper fool. He

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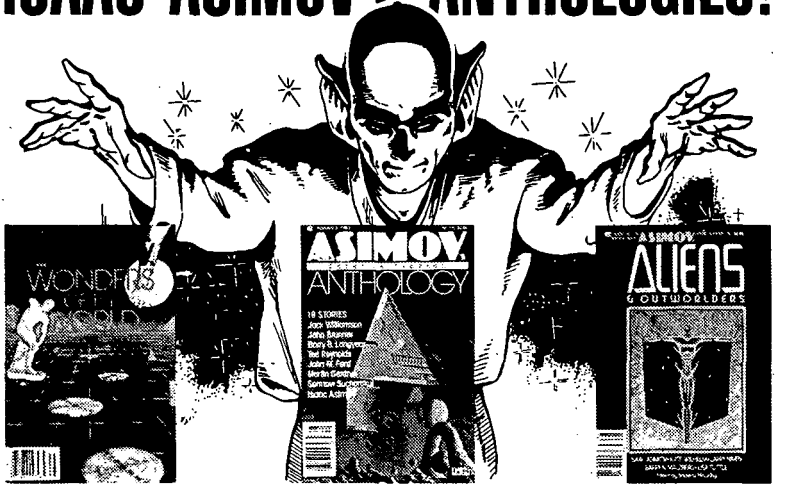

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left the standard rooted where it was and trudged back to the camp, only to find that all of it—tent, packs, gear, cookpots and dinner—was gone. In the failing light, he spied two rapidly retreating figures headed in the direction of the Wall.

"Plague rot 'em, lights and liver," Caius muttered. "Look at the buggers run! I never saw Junie move *that* fast, even when he wasn't chawed over by a dragon." He patted his legion dagger, still firmly tucked into his belt. "Well, old girl, it'll be a long saw, but you and me, we'll have that bleeder's head off right enough, even does it take us all night. After all, it's *my* dragon."

Caius' chest inflated with pride as he realized the full measure of his deed. "Didn't even need a sword to kill 'im," he told the air. "And if there's any man likes to fancy that means I did for the monster *bare-handed*, who's to tell the tale any different?" He was fairly swaggering by the time he returned to the scene of his triumph.

His mood of self-congratulation quickly soured to outrage when he beheld the tableau awaiting him at the fenside. The eagle had fallen again, knocked down by the hopeless struggle of a raggedy, gray-bearded relic who had the dragon by the narrowest bit of its neck and was obviously trying to yank the whole enormous carcase out of the water, hand over hand. The head, already pulpy, could not long stand such cavalier treatment. It squashed into splinters of bone and globs of unidentifiable tissue in the old man's grasp.

"Here, now!" Caius barked, rushing forward too late to preserve his trophy. He shouldered the gaffer aside, stared at what once might have been the full price of Goewin's respect—to say nothing of that of the commander and the Ninth—and burst into tears.

The old man cowered and wrung his hands, squeezing out little pips of blood and brain matter from between the palms. "Noble Chieftain, forgive this worthless fool for having dared to presume you had abandoned your lawful kill!" He spoke Gaelic, a dialect slightly different from Goewin's folk.

"Oh, you pasty old fiend, you've bally ruined *everything!*" Caius wailed, kicking the goo that had once been the dragon's head. "How am I ever going to prove I slew the beast without the head to show for it? I can't bloody well tow the whole fucking corpse down the Wall, can I now?"

"You might take a handful of the teeth with you, my lord," the old man suggested timidly, awed by Caius' passion.

"Oh, yes!" Caius did not bother to trim his sarcasm. "Dragon's teeth'll do, *won't* they? When every peddler the length and breadth of Britain's got *bags* full of such trumpery—grind 'em up and slip 'em in yer wine when yer woman wants cheering and you can't afford unicorn's horn on a legionary's pay—each and *all* culled from the mouths of any great fish

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luckless enough to wash up dead on the seacoast?" He gulped for breath, then spat, "Think the commander don't know *that* much? He's one of their biggest customers. You stupid *sod!*"

"High Chief, do but calm your wrath against me." The old man pointed a palsied finger at the pool that still concealed the bulk of the beast. "Together we can surely pull the monster's body onto land, and then you have but to cut out its heart and eat it and then—"

Caius stopped crying and frowned. "You off yer nut *entire*, or are you just senile? Eat a beastly dragon's *heart*? Whuffo?"

"Why, High Chief, then you shall be wiser than any wizard and understand the speech of all the birds of the air!" The old man flung his arms wide. He wore no more than a mantle of red deer hide, with a knot of anonymously colored cloth doing up his loins. His expansive gesture wafted the full power of his personal aroma right into Caius's face.

The legionary wiped his nose, then pinched it shut. "Is thad whad you was doing? Trying to beach this creature so as to ead id's heart and have yerself a chat with the birdies?" The old man nodded. Caius dropped his pinching fingers. "Mithra, what sort of cuckoo hatched you?"

The oldster hung his head. "My mother was a wise woman, my father I never knew. At my birth, the bards of our tribe tell that two dragons coupled in a field hereabouts and—"

"Right, right." Caius waved him silent. "Serve me right, asking for the straight story from a Celt," he said to himself. Aloud he added, "You one of them wizard fellers yerself, then? Or can't you afford decent clothes, just?"

A sly glint came into the old man's eye. When he smiled, Caius beheld a mouthful of the memories of decent teeth. "King and lord, you are as all-seeing as you are all-valiant. I am indeed privy to the occult forces of nature."

"Well, I knew there was summat of the privy about you," Caius riposted. He chortled over his own sally until he caught the look the old man was giving him. He decided to return to his wrathful pose; folk treated you with more honor if they feared you were going to send their conks down the same route he'd shown the dragon.

Thoughts of the beast forced him to consider the ruined trophy and his present position. Although he glared doom at the old man, in his heart he knew that he would not be able to afford the luxury of such a killing look when he faced his commander again.

Junie and Marcus, they'll make camp before I do, what with the time I'm wasting on this geezer and the thought of what I've got to say, he reflected. *Even with Junie banged up like he is, they'll stir their stumps to be first in line with the tale of what happened to the dragon. Think for a tick they'll make it truthful? Huh! That'd mean old Junie'd have to*

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admit as he was near ate and saved by me. Me! *He'd sooner—Well, he'd sooner crucify hisself, given there was a way to see that stunt through.*

Caius scraped his chin with fingers still sticky from the honey harvest and regarded the self-styled wizard thoughtfully. "Here," he said. "You called that great wallopin' beast me lawful kill, didn't yer?"

"Oh, aye, that I did, most awful lord."

"Saw the whole thing happen, did yer?"

The old man grinned like a death's head and nearly bobbed the head off his meager neck in agreement as he pointed to the paltry stand of scrub that had been his hiding place throughout the epic conflict.

"That's all right, then." Caius was better than satisfied. "You'll just nip along back to the legion camp with me and tell anyone as I points you at just exactly what happened here, how I stepped up bold to that 'ere dragon and—"

The old man's eyes rolled back in his head and he sank cross-legged to the ground. A horrid gurgling welled out of his throat as he tilted his face skywards. "Bold came the high king, master of men, open-handed to the least of his servants, and the golden eagle flew before him, symbol of his might and fame. Fled they all three, the cowards who had served him, leaving him lone to fight the unwholesome beast of the bogland. Terrible was his ire against the fainthearted. Cursing, he killed one man for his shameful act, striking him down like a dog—"

"Now just a minute, you old rattlebrain, I never killed no one but the *dragon!*"

The old man opened his eyes so sharply that Caius thought he heard a whipcrack. "Now you've made me lose the sacred thread of creation, O High Chief." He managed to make the highflown title sound like a synonym for *numbskull.*

"Arr, that don't signify. There wasn't half the truth in what you were saying—leave it to you Celts—and if the commander's not drunker than Silenus when he hears you out, he'll rule as *all* of what you have to say is pure horseshit."

An uneasy inspiration creased Caius' brow. "Excepting for the part as where you says I killed someone. Bee-wolf, curse him, *he's* gone. Who's to say what's become of him? That Junie and Marcus, they're clever as a brace of seaport whores, the pair of 'em. Shouldn't take 'em long to club together and tell the commander that *I* murdered the hero while *they* did for the dragon. Nodens' nuts, Junie's got the battle scars to prove it! And what've *I* got? What in bloody Hades have *I* got?" The gristle of reality stuck in his throat and he crumpled down beside the old man, sniveling.

"Does this mean that my noble lord will not help his sworn servant to cut out the dragon's heart?" the graybeard asked by way of comfort.

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"Oh, go help yerself to the soddin' heart, you old fool!" Caius sobbed. "Can't you see I've me own troubles?"

"The burden of rule falls heavy on the uncounseled," the old man intoned with due solemnity. "Yet, by my head, I swear never to give you ill-considered advice, nor to let aught but wise words pour from my lips into your ears."

"You try pouring anything into *my* ears, grizzlepate, and I'll cosh you a good one!" Caius raised his fists to the darkening sky. "Oh gods, not even a place to lay me head tonight, and odds are it won't be many days before the commander sends out a patrol to hunt me down!"

"Over the dead bodies of your guardsmen, my lord." The old man looked grim but determined.

"Over—*what?*" Caius asked.

Even allowing for oral decoration and a useless genealogical sidebar tracing the ancestry of the dragon's last-but-one victim, it did not take the old man too long to inform Caius that the beast had caused the death of his tribe's chieftain, a man of sterling character and many cattle. An upstart stripling named Llassar Llawr of the Lake Country had tried to avenge the chief's consumption, but he too had been dragged into the fen for his troubles.

"Is that why you were here, skulking about?" the Roman asked. "Waiting to see was anyone *else* fool enough to have a go at the monster, so's you could leap out and ask for a gob of heart did they succeed?"

"I was not *skulking*." The old man puffed up like an infected wound. "Wizards have no need to skulk. I was in trance, communing with the gods, awaiting a sign to foretell the coming of a hero to defeat the dragon and take the right of kingship over our tribe. Since the beast took the life of our lawful lord, it was only right that its death provide us with a replacement."

"So you were waiting for a hero?" Caius snorted. "Been there meself. Had one *on* me, I did, in fact, but he bolted." To himself he thought, *Wonder what did become of old Bee-wolf? Nothing too bad, I hope. Can't judge him too harsh, getting the monster sprung on him like that. How was he to know the beast wouldn't bide quiet 'til morning, then come be slaughtered all polite and planned? Luck to you, mate, wherever you are! Could be as you'll still make a hero, some day. Mithra knows there's fens aplenty in this wicked world, and maybe a dragon or two to be getting on with.*

To the old man he said, "I guess you'll have to make do with *me*, then. Kingship, eh? Well . . . it's bound to bring me no worse than the Glorious Ninth ever did, they can kiss me glorious bum goodbye, see if *I* care." He paused in his diatribe. " 'Course, there's Goewin . . ."

"This Goewin, is she your woman?" the old man asked.

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Caius suddenly recalled Goewin's voice, alternately throwing him to the figurative lions during his trial and slyly encouraging Maxentius' advances. His mouth set hard. "Not any *more* she's not; not after all the slap-and-tickle she's no doubt been up to soon's as I got fairly out of sight. Just you tell me one thing: If I'm yer new chieftain, like you say, this don't mean I've got to be forever riding about, stealing other folks' cows, now does it? I'm strictly infantry, you know."

"You need lead no cattle-raids, my lord." The old man smiled beneficently, if a trifle smugly. "Not if you tell the tribesmen that your faithful servant and all-wise wizard has counseled you that the gods are against it." Softly he added, "I could be even *more* all-wise if you'd give me a hand with the dragon's heart, Noble Chief. Unless you'd like to eat it yourself . . . ?"

Caius gagged.

By the light of a hastily kindled fire, the two men managed to haul a length of the dragon's dead body onto the shore a little after nightfall. Caius made some exploratory excavations with his dagger in the region of the beast's chest, but quickly saw that this was a futile game as well as a messy one.

"Like a field mouse trying to rape a lion," he complained. "This job wants a man-sized blade. Bugger all, if only that Bee-wolf bastard hadn't run off with—"

Caius remembered something. He glanced up at the hummock, where the departed barbarian's sword still stood at attention in the rotten log. "Hang on a mo', Grandda," he told the wizard. "Won't be gone but a shake."

The old man watched him ascend the high ground. The years, and the diet that had cost him most of his teeth, had been even less charitable to his eyes. The night, the wizard's nearsightedness, and the uncertain firelight all conspired to obscure just what happened next. The wizard wiped a small bit of rheum from his eyes, blinked, and looked again just in time to see Caius' hands close around one end of a long, thickish object standing upright in a second, far more massive, object. Just as the old man had mentally discounted a number of things those distant articles *might* be, Caius gave a heave and brandished something long and gleaming overhead with both hands.

There was only one possible object for a sane man to brandish in this fashion: a *sword*. As for what it had been sheathed *in* . . .

"A stone!" the wizard shouted. "He pulled the sword from a stone!"

By the time Caius came back down to the fire, the awe-smitten old man was groveling in the mud and gibbering about magical strength and miraculous proof of kingship.

"Say, O Highest of the High Chiefs," the wizard babbled, "Say what

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this, your humblest servant and counselor, shall name you before the tribe! Speak, and I shall fly swifter than the hunting merlin-hawk to spread your name among your waiting people!"

Caius rubbed his chin again. He was not sure what he had done to merit this, but he was not fool enough to question Fortuna's little pranks. "I am called Cai—" he began, then stopped. It would not take much for word to reach the Commander of someone with a Roman name jumped-up to chieftancy of a native tribe—not the way these Celts talked. It would take less time for the bastard to then dispatch the whole legion after him. The Glorious Ninth had gone to pot, true, but the strength of their old training still made them a bad enemy. Until Caius could give his new subjects the once-over and gauge their mettle as soldiers, he would do well to lay low.

"I mean, Cai, that's just me *milk*-name, as I was raised with," he said hastily. "What I'm *really* called is—" he cudgeled his brains for a moment, desperately trying to come up with a name that was not Roman and would not ring familiar in the Commander's ears.

He found one.

"—Arctos."

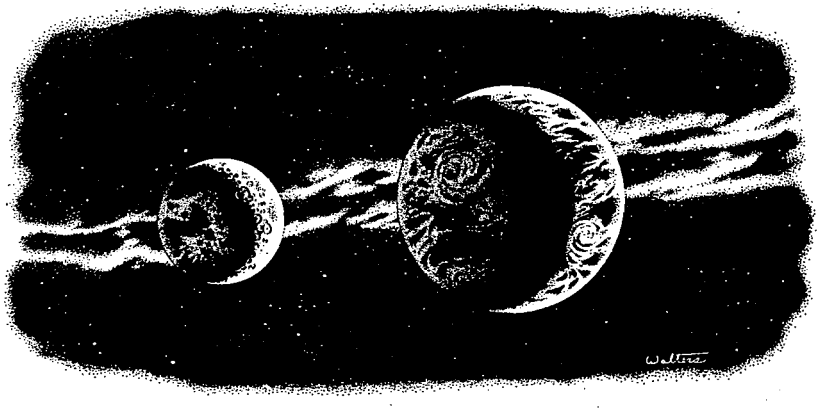
He settled down to clean his sword, completely forgetting his promise to cut out the dragon's heart.

"Lord," the old man prompted. "Lord, if you do not remove the beast's heart soon, it will lose all virtue."

"Sod off," said Arctos.

The old man scowled. "Bloody foreigners," he grumbled.

Still, it would make a good story. ●



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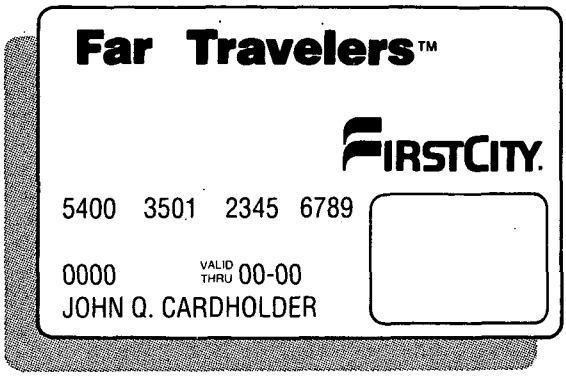

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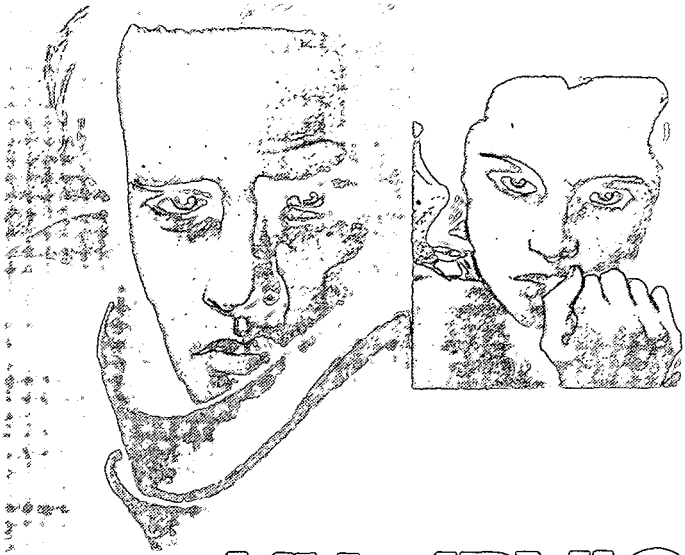
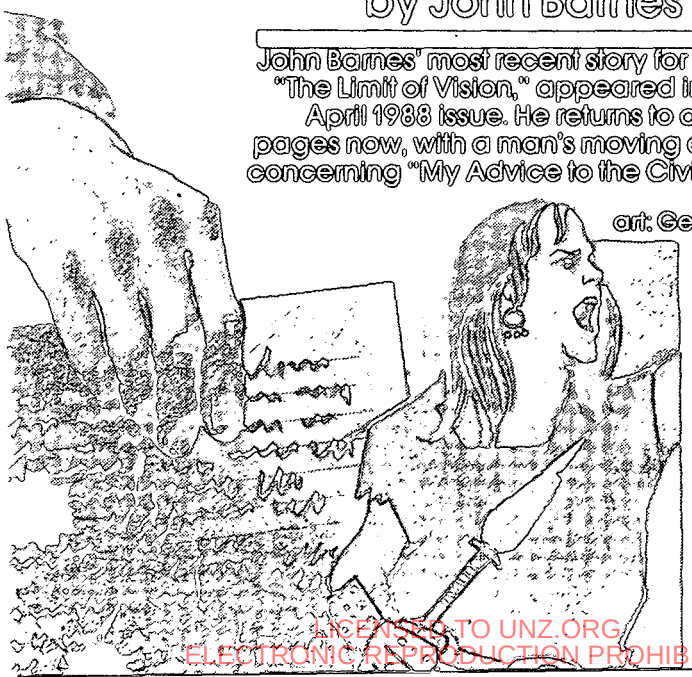


MY ADVICE TO THE CIVILIZED

by John Barnes

John Barnes' most recent story for *IAsfm*, "The Limit of Vision," appeared in our April 1988 issue. He returns to our pages now, with a man's moving epistle concerning "My Advice to the Civilized."

art: George Thompson



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The captain says we've got a couple of hours to get letters written.

A year ago I'd have spent the time writing letters for the younger men. But the literacy class I taught in winter bivouac took care of that. And I have no one to write to, anymore.

So he comes over to my spot at one of the former picnic tables on the former high school gym floor, and tries to cheer me up. Why he wants his company sergeant cheerful, I couldn't say. He's very sincere and sensitive and no help at all, because he can't fix the basic problem—I'm articulate and would love to write, but my family died in the St. Joseph raid, and old friends are all somewhere else, probably dead.

So he gets a dumb idea. "Look, Harry, if I have to I'll order you to do this. Suppose we don't win—maybe that's it for centuries, right? I mean we don't know that any other civilized settlement will make it. But sooner or later people will want to settle down, right, even if all of us are dead? I mean they are human out there. Or maybe some other settlement will make it all come together. And when civilization gets going again, they'll do archeology, just like Before."

I agree that all this is plausible because Dave can argue trivia to death.

"Well, then," he goes on, "write a letter to the future. You're a historian—tell the historians of the future what they'll want to know."

"I don't have their ZIP code. Maybe you would know it?"

His eyes widen. His fingers clench. He must be on edge; you don't mention what somebody did Before, like teaching college history. And I must be on edge too, because when someone is rude that way, you don't compound it by being rude back—like by alluding to the fact that Dave used to be a mailman. He sees we're headed for trouble, so he starts back to the big desk in the corner we share—the "Company Office."

He was just trying to help, and I feel bad for him, so I walk after him and say I'll do it. "We'll bury it in a plastic bag someplace before I get on the plane. If we win I can always dig it up and continue it."

I pick up the pen and begin.

I don't know how Before became After. The big cities were smashed and burned first thing, but radio reports from the settlements that can afford expeditions say that there's no detectable radioactivity around Kansas City, Caracas, Honolulu, or Detroit. So it probably wasn't a nuclear war. Things just got violent and ugly one day, or within a week, but communications was the first thing to go, so all we have is the word of some ham and military radio operators that everything went to shit everywhere at about the same time.

Ernwood, a physicist, said he'd been up at the observatory that day and all the instruments went weird, a lot of them burning out. He thought maybe some solar event caused a giant global EMP (I forget what that

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stands for but it was connected with nuclear winter or something), starting fires wherever conductors ran.

But that didn't explain why some engines and a few radios and so forth still worked, or why nothing in our little huddle of valleys did anything like that—I'd assume my wristwatch would have charred my wrist.

When I asked Ernwood about that, he started talking fast, drawing pictures in the dirt, and his red hair and the flutter of his hands reminded me so much of Cynthia that I got fascinated and couldn't remember what he said afterwards. (This was just after I lost Margie and the kids at St. Joseph, and I couldn't seem to get my mind off Cynthia.)

Anyway, if it will help you, I'm pretty sure Ernwood used words like "shadowing effects," "bounceback," "reradiation," and "induced opaqueness." Science was my dead worst subject, but if that gives you a clue, maybe you'll find a surviving library somewhere to put it all together.

I'd have Ernwood write something for you, but he died in the defense of Providence Falls when we lost it eight weeks ago to Thrasher's Horde. Because of his red hair, his was about the only head we recognized in the big box they sent to us.

What I can tell you, anyway, is that I got up one Wednesday and there was no electricity, no water, no gas, nothing on the radio, no phone. A few days after, hundreds of refugees came up the highway with wild stories of looting and fighting, cities on fire and towns deserted.

As I re-read what I've written so far, I realize that I'm leaving you the sort of cryptic document that the Dark Ages specialists I knew could spend ages arguing about. My problem is I'm a historian, and no one can write history in these circumstances—history is interpretation, the choice and expression of a view. There's plenty of material for historiographers, establishers of facts and data, in the last decade, but nothing yet for historians.

They announce at least two hours' delay. Fine with me. I feel better about the odds going after dark. So do a lot of the men—they're sacking out all over—but I can't sleep. Might as well keep writing, especially after the promise I was making when I was interrupted.

Anyway, for you historiographers, you grubby fact-grinding establishers of names, dates, and places:

Before

Late XXth century A.D., USA, up until 199-

After

The current period. We are in the ninth year After, which will become

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the tenth year After five weeks after the next spring solstice. I'm very proud of myself for remembering a word like "solstice" and that that's what starts spring, so you'll have an accurate date to work from.

Civilization

That's what we call ourselves. Politically we're a republic constituted from the old county government of Carson-Bridger County. We used to control about 2500 square miles. We are now down to less than 1000 square miles, which Thrasher penetrated yesterday. He's being slowed by harassment for the moment. The plan is to get him a long way in before we spring what we hope will be a trap.

(Units of measure in above)

Mile = a little over 5000 feet, I think. The number 1760 comes to mind, too, but I can't remember why, and I don't think it's right. Use the land mile—nautical miles are different. One foot (the plural is feet) = 12 inches, I'm sure. One inch = |----------|. (I copied that from an old ruler).

Basic geography

This will be buried at Gallatin High Barracks, which is our main military encampment. One half of a mile west of us is the old UMW Hall, where the Legislature meets, and that's across the street from the old County Courthouse, which is where the President and the Speaker have their offices.

St. Joseph

Nearest town east of here. Clorox's Horde surprise-raided it at the beginning of summer in the year 8. They killed everyone, took all the Before stuff they could carry, and torched the rest. We caught them and killed about fifty, three miles beyond Frederickstein Pass. The next spring they were wiped out by Excess's Horde.

Horde

Gang of raiders. Always named after their leaders. North of us is Wanker's Horde, and then clockwise from them there's Banger's, Excess's, Rover's (due south), Nitrofucker's, Fun Boy's, and Thrasher's. Thrasher seems to be the successful Attila type—Wanker, Banger, and Fun Boy have all been forced to swear some kind of fealty to him in the last couple of years.

The Company

I am in the Northwest Company. In better days we guarded Angel Break

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Pass. Now the whole Army will try to drive Thrasher's Horde (and its allies) back toward the pass. Northwest Company will try to seal it against them, so the Army—with the help of a couple of other surprises—can corner them for a massacre.

Army

Eleven companies, down from fourteen. They're about the size of US Army companies, Before. We have a colonel, Bob Peterin, and under him there are eleven captains, of whom David Lipowicz is mine. I'm his company sergeant and de facto XO—we've decided civilization can survive without lieutenants, at least for a while. The President is Mrs. Roberta Gibson, and the Speaker of the Legislature is Tiffany Ann Hutchinson, both of the Democratic/No Quarter Party. My party, by the way.

That was off the subject of my annotations, but I couldn't stand the thought that you might know the names of the Hordes' leaders and not ours.

Well, that used up twenty minutes. I stretch and flex my hand, numb from the unaccustomed strain of writing so much in a room that's rapidly getting cold.

The phone beeps. I pick it up. It's Samuelson with confirmation that the plans are go. I still can't believe that our little Cessna was able to get enough parts from other airfields so that we could get all four Dash-8's to fly, after all this time, or even that we managed to make enough methanol, and find enough kerosene, to fuel them.

So strange to think I'll be flying again!

Out the window, the sun has almost set. Dusk has that wonderful October gold color that Margie and I used to walk in for hours. The last fall we had together, Joshua was big enough to walk with us too, not having to be picked up and carried.

I can't believe I'll be flying again, and yet I used to fly into Salt Lake weekly when Harris and I were working on that silly paper about Reconstruction government opposition parties.

Will it all work? Supposedly we'll fly out low, away from Thrasher's Horde, and circle around to land in Angel Break Pass on the old interstate. That will give us most of the night to dig in. But we've had no rehearsals.

I look up from my thoughts. Three men, waiting patiently for me to notice them, want me to witness their wills. I do it, and talk with them for a couple of minutes. They go back to their benches to get some sleep. I should write more if I want to finish before we go, but instead I stand up and stretch.

The October gold fades to indefinite gray, and I look out the window,

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past the old football stadium, to the airfield. There's an indistinct dark lump out there.

It's a Q-hut, and it contains a collection of scuba tanks, soda machine cylinders, propane tanks, and so forth, all loaded with the nerve gas Bernie Klipfer was finally allowed to make after we won the election. (Well, the party won. I lost to a Democratic Christian by eight votes.) I helped attach the farm-dynamite heads and the bedsheet-strip tails.

So strange to imagine that those crude devices could end the threat within a few days. I wonder what the B-29 crew thought—really thought, not said later to journalists—when they first saw Little Boy? But then they had been winning.

The map of the region swims up in my head, with a red arrow, the kind newspapers used Before, stabbing like a spearhead into the soft, breastlike northwest bulge of civilization. I picture Angel Break Pass at the base of the arrow, and the Army as a dark bar in front of it.

Had we been able to do this last year, we could have dealt with all the Hordes by Dash-8. As it is, we must beat Thrasher or it's all for nothing.

But if we do beat Thrasher—then gas will fall on the other Hordes' winter encampments, some clear night in January when nothing can move far. We'll follow it up with fire bombs that same night, then pneumococcus a week later if Ralph Rogers can get it isolated and into a workable bomb by then. We may have to content ourselves with cholera in their streams in the spring, and with brucellosis in their cattle.

I've never been religious, but I pray now, offering thanks for all three, nerve gas and napalm and germs, my head down on the desk, the wood cool against my forehead.

And then I pray for us as well. The phone beeps again.

There was business to take care of, and we've had one more delay, so it's two hours since I last wrote and we go in about an hour. Now that the annotations are all written, I find myself wanting to tell you things, but I have no order, no scheme, no vision to put them into. As I said before, history isn't yet possible.

The main thing we learn from history is that no one learns anything from history. Somebody said that but I forget who.

Now that I've written all those dusty facts down for the pedants, I'll take what time I've got to say what I think.

Someone is crying, very quietly, in the southeast corner of the gym. It's very dark away from the desk. Maybe I miss electric lights most. It's dusty—no men to spare for cleaning this past month. I don't want to sneeze and draw attention. Besides, I might wake someone.

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It's my youngest squad leader, Rodney, who is sixteen. He got his men to go to sleep and then felt bad himself afterward.

We know his age because when we found him seven years ago he had a passport. Back when we still did rescue, and we were still absolutely the good guys.

If it hadn't happened, he'd have been here, or somewhere like it, on a Friday night in October, at a basketball game or a dance.

I ask what's wrong. Just nerves, and a bad dream. He'll be fine—he's been through the whole summer's campaign already. Anyone can get scared. Since he's okay, I go back to the desk.

It's a long way back to the candle. I go slowly, avoiding stepping on people; moments from Before swarm up in me. I remember the cold floors on my way to the bathroom in my pj's, back when all I had to fear was monsters.

Dave doesn't look up from his map. He's asleep with his head in his hands. I sit down in the little pool of red-gold flickering light and pick up the pen again. Beyond our smear of light, it's absolutely dark. I hear only the soft white noise of many people breathing.

Sorry about the time taken from writing to you. I had to comfort a crying kid. I can't help that—I grew up in civilization.

But you understand. Either you're civilized or you're trying—otherwise you would use this to start a fire, not read it.

Unless you've found this *very* late, when you're already dreaming of the lost charms of barbarism. Then no one will read this except some pedant who will grind it up to count how many different verbs I use and the frequency of misspelled words.

That too is civilized.

All I will do now is let myself ramble. I might be decades or centuries older than you are, and you know old people are garrulous.

The moonlight is coming in the window now. Before I begin to write, I go over to look at it. Almost, except for the dead streetlight, this could be the same town, Before.

My Advice to the Civilized

One. *Write down a lot of stuff that doesn't matter.*

Civilization itself isn't much more than accumulated stuff we like that doesn't matter. All that *really* matters is getting enough to eat, sleeping safe and warm, and having somebody to talk to. If you're less strict, there are other things that also matter: politics, GNP, armies moving. Let somebody else write all that down.

Write down stuff that *doesn't* matter.

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Like that Margie married me because she liked the University but hated being a grad student. And that I asked her because I knew I wouldn't do any better at my age and salary. And that we had Josh because our birth control stockpile finally ran out.

About the time he was born, we fell in love again. Or maybe just one of us did, and the other was gracious about it. That's how we had Sally.

Graciousness is attention to small details—which you should write down. When Josh learned to hang icicles one at a time and not just hurl them at the tree, he was learning graciousness.

I don't know now why I think of Cynthia so often, but she was gracious, too, and this truly can't matter in the future—it doesn't even matter now—so it's a perfect example.

When she decided the romance was over, she remembered how strongly I associated places with things that happened there, so she made sure she told me in a place I wouldn't ever have to see again.

Even now remembering Larry's Family Dining hurts, but I have no idea whether it was still standing even ten years Before. Just a formica/steel place off the freeway with twenty-four-hour breakfast, a coffee pot on every table, and everything-creme pie.

Cynthia told me as we ate. Uncharacteristically plain in jeans, sweatshirt, and no makeup, she still wore her trademark plastic earrings that looked like a cross between fishing lures and IUDs. Rain thumped against the window next to us and slid down in lumpy sheets.

We had gone in my car: her way of saying she trusted me.

The full moon is higher now. In London in the 40s they called the Harvest Moon (normally the longest full moon in the year) the Bomber's Moon because it made it easy for planes to operate.

I hope it still works. The rhombus of moonlight on the floor is divided by the crosspiece shadows and I think of the end of *Mrs. Miniver.*

I try to concentrate on something serious, but my own advice, scribbled on the candle-shadowed, flickering page before me, disagrees. If I had life to live over, I would think more about whatever popped into my head, and much less about what I was supposed to. The only thing worth doing I did in grade school was daydream.

I look back to the shadowed cross in the dust-yellowed moonlight on the floor and I see the end of *Mrs. Miniver*, again. Greer Garson's face glows, tilted up toward the crossed beams in the bomb hole in the church. Cut to four Spitfires roaring across the sky seen through the upper left corner of the cross—the basic shape of an American flag (=hope?) overlaid on a cross.

I get up to look out the window. There have been some hundreds of days of fighting across the past several years. There will be more if we

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win. Dave talks about doing what Powell or Pike or Lewis and Clark did, a real exploration of the territory, "once things settle down." He's promised to take me.

As I turn back to the desk, the moonbeam is so bright dust specks shine in it. My shadow blanks them like the Black Thing in *A Wrinkle in Time.*

When I was seven or eight, at Grandma's house, I discovered that if I watched closely enough I could follow a speck out of the sunlight and into the surrounding shadow. As long as I didn't look away I could stay with it. I followed one speck all the way into the hallway and the sunlight of another window. There it was lost in the busy swirl of other specks.

Here's something else that doesn't matter. Margie never learned to love *Mrs. Miniver* the way I did. Probably because it had been Cynthia's and my movie. Some couples have songs (Margie and I had "Scotch and Soda") and foods (one of my roommates and his girlfriend felt that pineapple and green pepper pizza twice a week was mandatory) but Cynthia and I were the only couple I knew who had a movie.

It showed as part of the classic film series, at 7:00 and 9:30 for two nights, every semester. We made it to all eight showings junior year, and six the year before.

Cynthia and I used to fantasize constantly about our living in the "*Mrs. Miniver* Universe." She would be a British Army nurse, because she had always wanted to be British, and I would be a former Okie who had hoboed and worked for the CCC, because I had always wanted a romantic tough background even though (because?) I'd grown up in the suburbs. "Now"—circa 1942 or '43, MMU—I would be a ball turret gunner on a B-17. (I'd rather have flown a Mustang but that was more middle than working class.)

It went on for more than a year. We carried it as far as learning ballroom jitterbug and taking a lot of history courses covering the New Deal period, World War II, and occasionally the early Cold War. Some forties-style stuff was in fashion so we could sort of dress the part. If there had been Lucky Strikes available then, we'd have started smoking.

You see what I mean. Write down stuff that doesn't matter. If you don't see what I mean, you'll probably just burn this, or wipe your ass with it.

Dave's right. I can't stand the idea.

Two. *Keep the roads open.*

That's what we're trying to do.

Barbarians travel, but *they* only open roads for themselves, just carving holes through human geography and continuing on their lice-ridden way. The Vandals moved a lot by fifth and sixth century standards, but they

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made it tough and dangerous for anyone else to try. Civilization requires that people who aren't bothering other people have a safe, easy way to go other places. You've got to know the world isn't your village, and you've got to be surrounded by people who know that.

I guess we were losing, Before. In 1910 you could have gone from Shanghai to Capetown, north to Stockholm, and all the way back east to Vladivostok, mostly by land with no problems on the way. Even in 1970 you could still drive from Scotland to India, and from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, though that was getting dangerous. By the time the big change came, the same trips would have ended in Ankara and in Mexico City.

Anyway, we're going to re-open the roads north and south next spring. There are still a lot of "holds"—ranches with forts—out there, that could feed us if we got the roads safe again.

Gunfire.

I lift the phone to my ear. The connection's always open so I just say "Northwest here. What's the shooting?"

"No problem," Samuelson says. It's his standard answer to everything. "That's our guys. We want them real nervous, so some guys from South Company ambushed a scouting party that was dumb enough to walk up a road. Radio report is six dead, nine to be Plan B'd."

Plan B is what got Mrs. Gibson my vote. Instead of trying to rehabilitate the wounded (they take off as soon as they're well) or exchange prisoners (Hordes don't take any), we hang them, naked, and mutilate the corpses, on the approaches to town. We'd held off on doing that this summer, saving it for shock value.

I voted for Plan B, but I didn't urge anyone else to. Civilization is built on those small ethical distinctions, made repeatedly and recorded.

The rising moon looks smaller now, against stars instead of trees and hills. There are footprints on it. I remember my father shook me awake, made me come downstairs in my T-shirt and pajama bottoms, because there would only be a first time *once*.

Dad was really into the antiwar movement, and the room was full of his students, but unlike any other time I could recall, it was dead silent.

Armstrong bounced around like a kangaroo, sharp-edged with no air to soften it. It was so much like a marionette show under a bright spotlight, like *Thunderbirds* or *Supercar*, that I unconsciously looked for the thin white lines of the strings.

There's no more gunfire. I think of Providence Falls and St. Joseph, and my stomach rolls and my heart pounds to be out there, cutting at their corpses, and to see Thrasher's face when he sees them.

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The Hordes would not bother to kill a person before starting to cut—another small, important distinction.

I sit down to write more, but the guns start going again. I pick up the phone.

"No problem. Spiders," Samuelson explains. Those are the young teenagers whose job is to fire a few shots from ambush at the first enemy they see and then get out. It forces the invaders to stop and duck each time, slowing their advance. "Now that they're between Thrasher and his forward scouts, they can slow him down a lot. They can shoot and scoot all night." Samuelson sounds as happy as he ever does.

I thank him, sit down, and pick up the pen.

People who plan roads, bridges, sewers, and so forth are called civil engineers. Civilization happens in cities, where civil society is possible, because of civil engineers. Cities are fed by roads, drained by sewers, watered by pipes that they lay down.

There have been barbarian poets and composers, even painters and some lawyers, but never a barbarian civil engineer. You have to be civilized to care about roads.

I used to take walking tours, from hotel to hotel on foot with just a knapsack. I backpacked too and enjoyed that but it wasn't the same thing. Backpackers walk to see empty useless land; walking tourists walk to see people—where they live and work, what they offer, threaten, sing, or shout to each other along the road. Backpackers say fuck you to people and commune with nature like gibbering savages; walking tourists commune with people.

Backpackers like trails, walking tourists like roads. Roads are civilized. Almost all walking tourists like backpacking but few backpackers like walking tours. Civilized people can enjoy barbaric pleasures, but not vice versa.

Cynthia got me into walking tours, the two summers we were dating. A decade later I got Margie into them.

Cynthia's whole family did walking tours, so there wasn't much choice if I wanted to see her for those two weeks. Besides, I liked her family. We walked in Vermont one year, and Minnesota the next.

I remember Cynthia swinging along on a dirt road through some state park in Vermont. She wore a black, stretchy sleeveless dress and hiking boots. She said it was comfortable; I told her she looked like Olive Oyl, though with her thick red hair hanging down in that French braid, there was no resemblance at all.

Her other dress was blue. Nightly showers, and always being around laundromats in the evening, meant never being more than one day dirty. If you've been backpacking

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(will your civilization do such things? I hope so!

Three. *When you no longer* must *walk, walk for fun.*)

As I was saying, if you've been backpacking, you can imagine the pleasures of being clean every day.

One morning, on a deserted back road, when the rest of her family had gotten well ahead, Cynthia and I stopped to fuck. We'd done this often enough to have the technique perfected. For an hour, we'd been talking dirty to each other, quietly, in between some intense kissing—we called it "oral foreplay." We were both ready at the first good spot.

She pulled the black dress off over her head and dropped it on the grass, skinned down her panties, and leaned against a tree in only her bra, hiking boots, and wool socks. I took a rubber from the side pocket in my pack that held the survival kit ("put the stuff that you may need suddenly there," her father had said), and pulled off my shorts and underwear. She put the rubber on me.

As I slipped into her, pressing her against the tree, she gasped, choking down the loud moans she used to make in my frat house room, and pressed her face against my shoulder.

I looked away. Her fifteen-year-old sister Elaine was watching us, standing a few feet away on the trail.

She smiled and gestured for me to go on. As I went harder and faster into Cynthia, her hands clutching my buttocks, Elaine and I stared into each other's eyes. I even moved a little to the side, and Elaine came closer and squatted, so she could get a better look.

As I finished, Elaine stepped into a little side trail and disappeared. I had not thought of Cynthia at all, the whole time.

For the rest of the trip, Elaine would smile at me at odd times. Once she flashed a bare breast at me. I did not know how to respond.

Maybe in penance, or maybe because I didn't want anything else to happen, I didn't fuck Cynthia for the remaining four days of the trip.

When I told Margie about it, years later, she seemed confused and upset. Months later she asked if I wanted to do it outdoors with her, or while someone watched.

I said what she wanted to hear. I would gladly do it with her under any circumstances, but I didn't feel any need to repeat my youthful experiences.

As I said it, I felt disappointment. Margie was affectionate rather than dramatic, and I had always liked drama.

Four. *Enjoy lying, scandal, hypocrisy, and manners.*

Barbarians speak the truth all the time. Thrasher's last message to us was "I am coming. I want loot. I want pussy. Fuck you."

When I was in college the bathroom graffiti used to say hypocrisy was the vaseline of social intercourse. And most manners boil down to hy-

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pocrisy—doing a thing the way that pleases others, not the way that comes naturally.

Only barbarians are always honest. Had I been honest with Dave about this busywork, I'd never have enjoyed writing it.

The phone beeps. I pick it up and say "Yeah, Northwest."

"Ready for go in twenty?"

"Sure." Go will mean lining up and crossing the field to board. I hang up. I'll wake the men in ten—they all sleep with boots on and packs loaded, and there's bound to be another delay at the airfield.

I set my watch alarm. In five years at the very most, the last batteries for watches will all be dead.

Gunfire far away—a harassing party shooting up Thrasher's rear?

Has Thrasher found the mutilated corpses? How did he react?

Thrasher's message was all honesty because barbarians rejoice in the rough honesty of discomfort—hair shirts, vision quests, war, gang rape, miserliness, all the ways of injuring yourself to propitiate the Big Booga-Booga in the Sky.

People think honesty is morally correct because all societies are barbarian in their early years, when their moral foundations are laid.

When I learned of Margie's affair with Robertson—an education professor, of all things—I threw the TA who was trying to tell me about it down a flight of stairs, and was disappointed that his arm didn't break. I cried all night after talking with Margie. I spat in Robertson's face when I met him in a bar. (A good move as it turned out—he was not tenured and I was, and the University decided he would be the easier problem to eliminate.)

All that was stupid. There was no style to any of it. I was a stupid jerk instead of the suave, controlled sophisticate I wanted to be.

Five. *Act like who you'd rather be, not who you are.*

I check my watch: Sixteen minutes left. The moon is high; our little town glows. I feel in my bones that this will work.

Six. *Dress well.* Junior year, the night of my frat's May Formal, Cynthia wore a perfectly white strapless dress that clung to her, and elbow-length white gloves. I wore a straight black dinner jacket, ruffled shirt, and black tie.

We moved like perfectly poised dolls or statues through the evening. It was only the next day that I realized I had *been* sophisticated, rather than just feeling it.

I remember that the stench of cigars and the sweet piercing scent of

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gin plus sweat in the crowded hotel ballroom drove us out onto the terrace.

We kissed, once, lightly, in the moonlight. There were a few other couples out there, along the wall, none near us. The lilacs stung the other smells from my nose, and the alcohol burned in my brain.

A wind came up—it would later become a thunderstorm, and lead to our taking a room in the hotel and spending the night making love in the flashes and thunder, but that came later and didn't matter as much, now that I look back. Right now the wind was still just a warm brushing of spring-soft boughs.

The band played Chad and Jeremy's "Summer Song." I took Cynthia in my arms, very formally, for a foxtrot, and we danced there on the terrace.

Her face was pale and deeply shadowed in the moonlight. When I kissed her at the end of the song, her skin was cool, her breath hot, on my cheek.

I knew then, as surely as I knew anything, that I was going to marry her. I was wrong, but I really knew it.

Ten minutes. I blow the whistle and people start moving. I pull out a plastic bag from the desk, but I won't bury my letter. It should be fine if I just put it in the bag, in the inside pocket of my coat. Raiders will take my watch and wedding ring, but they won't bother with paper, if it comes to that.

This way, if it does come to that, the words might have my body to go with them.

As I fold it I realize I'm not done.

I knew a lot of things. I knew Josh would be a big strong kid and drive me crazy by being a jock. I knew Margie would eventually love me. I knew the power would come back on and the phones start working, by the end of the first week After.

Seven. (Almost forgot!) *Make wine.*

And all good and beautiful things.

And especially make love, in the teeth of the odds.

Time.

I seal the bag, zip it in, and start bellowing at the company now forming up.

RHIP—I'm getting a window seat. I still don't believe, after all these years, an airplane. ●

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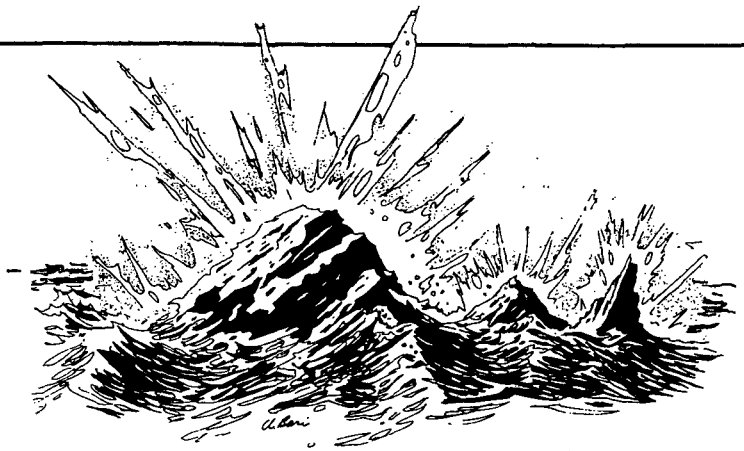

TINTAGEL MORNING: Song

by Jane Yolen

I came over the hill on a Cornwall dawn,
My boots well soaked by the salt grass lawn.
And down below, where the waves crashed in
Was a girl on her back, her legs just opening.
There was blood on her thighs and the sea in her hair,
I could scarcely move but just stand and stare.
For a child gushed out on its own frothy wave.
Then she picked it up and turned towards a cave
That was carved by the sea, that was cut by the storm,
That was filled with a swirling mistlike form.
And she cried as she turned, with a voice so dead,
That I shook where I stood, filled with more than dread.

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"Come, Merlinnus," she called, past the roar of the sea,
"Come, you old piece of craft, take my son from me."

Then she picked up the child, still bright red with blood,
And she placed him away from the tidal flood
Twixt a rock and a rock, cradled well in the sand,
And she wept as she touched his wet little hand.
Then she stood, with the blood raining down her thighs,
And the sound of the sea covered up her cries.
She walked 'round a stone and was gone from my view.
So I raced down the steps, slick with brine and with dew.
When I got to the rocks where she'd placed the child
The bay was a boil and the wind was wild.
But nothing lay twixt the rocks and the sand
But a small sunken place and the print of a hand.

"Come, Merlinnus," she'd called, past the roar of the sea,
"Come you old piece of craft, take my son from me."

I could swear that I'd seen both the girl and the babe
And the mist swirling round in the tide-filled cave.
Still the only prints that were left in the sand
Lead right to the place where *my* boots did stand.
And Ygraine was a girl out of myth, from a tale,
Who had given her first born away in a gale
To a wizard or a Druid or a Tintagel mage.
It was only a story set down on a page.
So what *had* I seen on that grey moisty dawn
With the sun not risen but the night most gone?
With my own sons grown—did my heart want more
Than a high rock climb on a wind-swept tor?

Still I hear her voice coming back from the sea,
"Come, you old piece of craft, take my son from me.
Come, you old piece of craft, take my son from me."

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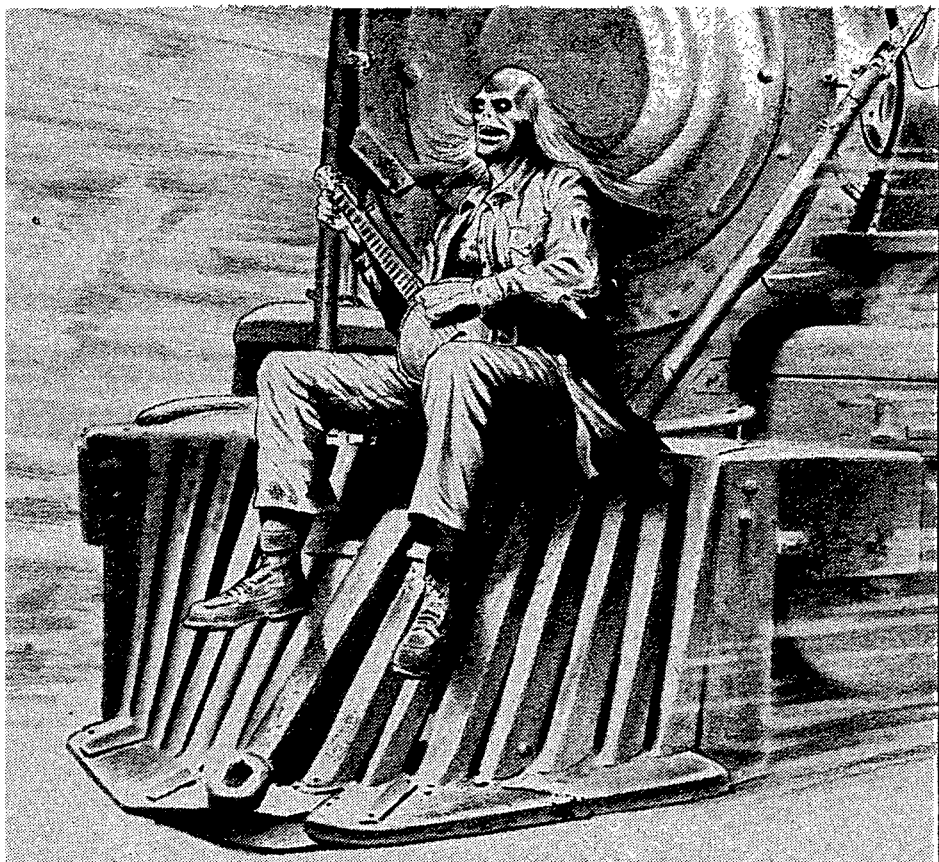

TRAINS

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch has written nonfiction pieces for nearly a hundred publications and other outlets. Her articles have been published in such magazines as *Emmy*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *In Business*, and her news stories have been aired on National Public Radio. Ms. Rusch is a graduate of the 1985 Clarion Writers' Workshop, and a 1989 finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer.

art: Bob Walters

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In her earliest memories, Corinne saw trains. Big, black trains that belched smoke and ash, their metal wheels grinding on metal track. The old trains, not the streamlined vehicles they would become, but the trains of her childhood, the glamor trains that, a decade later, would span the continent. She always associated Silas with trains, but she didn't actually see him until she was fourteen.

She was running down the street, her long skirt twisted and her hair disheveled, escaping the house, escaping her stepfather and his roving fingers. When her breasts grew and the blood came, his fingers seemed to grow longer, more demanding, and more than once he rubbed his crotch against hers. She hadn't told anyone; he said he would hurt her if she did. And so she just endured the fingers and the rubbing until the day when she would marry, when another man would save her from all of that.

She tripped as she ran up a flight of stairs and found herself on the train platform. In the distance, she could see the billowing smoke signaling an approaching engine. She turned to run back down, but her skirt caught, sending her flying across the rails. She looked again toward the train. A man dressed in a black suit sat on the cow catcher, strumming a banjo. The sight mesmerized her; she didn't even think of getting up.

She wouldn't know until years later that she was looking at Silas.

Then someone grabbed her blouse. The fabric ripped and she pushed her hands against the wooden ties. Her stepfather had followed her. He was going to embarrass her here, in public, in front of the man with the banjo. Another hand grabbed her armpit, brushing against her breast, and pulled her against the platform. She landed on her back, sending the air through her in a whoosh as the train roared by.

No man sat on the cow catcher. She had imagined him, his banjo, everything.

And nearly died.

"You okay?"

She looked up into a soot-begrimed face. The eyes gazing down on her were green, surrounded by thick, thick lashes. "You okay?" he asked again.

"I think the wind got knocked out of me, but other than that." Her voice came out breathless and tired. He wrapped a coat from a nearby bench around her. She looked down. Some of her skin was showing through the rips in her blouse. With her left hand, she closed the front of the coat. "Thank you," she said.

"That was close."

She nodded.

He sat beside her. He smelled of coal and woodsmoke. "I'm Nathan."

"Corinne," she said, and smiled her prettiest smile.

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* * *

She didn't meet Silas until nearly seven years later. Nathan had left the night before on one of his many trips for the railroad. Corinne buttoned the sleeves on her dress. The bruises on her arms had faded, but were still visible. She touched the mark on her cheek. If she wore a hat, no one would notice.

She leaned against the wavy glass. He would be gone for a week. A week, without his yelling or the fist that came crashing into her even when she hadn't done anything wrong. Sometimes she thought all men spoke loudest with their hands. But she knew differently. Her real father hadn't touched her at all. Her real father had been an honorable man who had died in an honorable way. She had a medal from President Lincoln to prove it.

Corinne put a basket over her arm and one of her prettiest bonnets on her head. Her gown was a bit faded and too warm, but it would have to do. Her daughter was asleep and would stay so for a few more hours. Corinne was going out; she didn't care what Nathan would say.

The morning was fresh, clear, not yet hot, although the stale-sweet odor of horses permeated the air. A horse she had never seen before was tied outside the bank; another in front of the general store. She looked at the pair as she passed. Both were dapple grays, so much alike that they seemed to be the same animal.

"Startling creatures, aren't they?"

Corinne whirled, surprised by the soft baritone. A man sat on the rough-hewn bench in front of the store, his face shaded by his wide-brimmed hat. His legs were crossed and a banjo rested on his knee.

"You surprised me," she said.

"No more than you surprise me." He took off his hat. His hair was jet-black and his skin was the color of wheat. His eyes sparkled. Their blueness seemed to match the morning sky. "But I suppose you're wearing a wedding band."

She held out her left hand. The thick gold ring seemed tarnished, binding. She could almost feel it constricting her finger.

He nodded. "I'm Silas."

"Corinne."

"It's a mite warm to be wearing long sleeves, Corinne."

She flushed and ducked her head aside so that he couldn't see. The sentence was too pointed. He knew what her sleeves were hiding. "I've shopping," she said.

He touched her hand. His fingertips were hard but the rest of the skin was soft. She pulled away.

"A good Christian lady would stand and talk."

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His eyes made her nervous. There was too much intelligence in them. He seemed to miss nothing. "I'm not a good Christian lady," she said.

Any other man would have taken that as a rebuke, but Silas seemed to hear the truth behind the words. "Then you can take the ring off," he said, "and it won't make any difference."

She smiled. "You're forward, Silas."

"And you're lonely." He stood up, grabbing his banjo by the neck. "Let me take you home and make you something to eat."

"Thank you," she said, moving closer to the door. "But I have shopping to do."

He shook his head. "Best wait for that. Mrs. Stevens died in her sleep."

Corinne froze. Mrs. Stevens, who ran the store, had been sick, but not that sick. "You were just inside?"

"Yes." He slung the banjo across his back and went down the steps, touching the flank of the dapple gray. "The banjo and I, we have a bit of magic. It makes the pain go away."

"Of course," Corinne said, following him. "Like taking off my wedding ring makes the marriage go away."

Nathan arrived a week later. The back door banged open, knocking Corinne out of sleep. She huddled in the middle of the bed, knowing from the heavy footsteps that Nathan was home and Silas wouldn't share her bed any more.

"Corinne?" Nathan's voice was loud, the diction slurred. "I'm gonna find you, you slut."

Slut. A new word. She shivered and pulled the covers up tighter. If she were a more courageous woman, she would get the gun he left for her in the bureau.

"I don't leave to have my wife sleeping with no fancy man."

She swallowed. Angry and drunk. He had almost killed her that last time. She got out of bed and smoothed her nightgown against her body, the nightgown that she had worn waiting for Silas. Her feet whispered across the scratchy wood floor as she walked to the bureau.

A light grew in the hall. Maxine cried out in her sleep. Corinne opened the bureau drawer and felt among the linens until she found the gun barrel. A man stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the light.

"Bitch."

She took a deep breath and pulled the gun out, holding it with both hands. She was shaking. "Leave me alone."

"Goddamn slu—" A sharp crack echoed and the silhouette crumpled slowly to the floor. Corinne still held the shaking gun. A wisp of smoke seemed to rise from its mouth.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Maxine was shrieking.

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"Tell her it's all right, Corinne." A deep baritone, rumbling from the hall.

"Silas!" Corinne had never felt so relieved. Jesus, it had been Silas who stopped Nathan. She had been afraid that she had done it.

"Mommy!"

"It's all right, Maxy. Mommy will be right there." She set the gun back in the bureau and walked out into the hall. A lantern sat on the floor and beside it lay Nathan, blood seeping from his chest. Silas bent over him, the banjo slung across his back.

"Is he dead?" Corinne asked.

Silas nodded. He pulled the banjo around to the front and began to pick, although Corinne could barely hear the notes. "Get Maxine," he said.

She went into her daughter's bedroom. The little girl was sobbing, large whooping sounds that caught in her throat. Corinne picked her up, smelled the sleeping-child sweat mixed with fear, and stroked her daughter's hair. "It's all okay," Corinne whispered, and with each note she began to believe it.

Finally, she took Maxine out into the hall. Silas seemed surprised to see her. He touched her face, nodded, as if he recognized her calmness and said, "I have to leave."

The calm shattered. Maxine's body tensed as Corinne's did. "No," Corinne whispered. "You can't leave me now."

He studied her for a long moment. "I like you, Corinne."

"Then stay," she said.

"I can't."

She gazed at Nathan's body and then at the home which had never been a home, only a place of pain and bruises. The choice was easy. "I'll come with you."

"I usually travel alone. I've never allowed anyone to come with me before." He plucked idly at the banjo. The notes sent shivers through Corinne. Finally, he sighed. "There are three rules you have to follow. Ask no questions. Put yourself first."

"That's two," she said, afraid that her statement was too close to a question.

"Go ahead." He smiled. "Your last question before all of this starts."

She swallowed. "What's the third rule?"

"When I leave, do not follow. Wait for me to come back."

Corinne smiled and hugged her daughter closer. "I think I can do that," she said.

After they'd made love, Corinne lay on her side of the bed and stared at the banjo glistening in the dark. She knew that some time before

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dawn, Silas would creep out of bed, grab the banjo and disappear for several hours. Sometimes he left in the middle of meals and sometimes he didn't come home at all. She couldn't question him, but he had seen the look in her eyes once, just once, toward the beginning.

"I'm the only one working Nevada," he said, as if that were an explanation. "It gets tiring."

Tiring for her, too, wondering where he was and what he was doing. There always seemed to be enough money, more than enough, he told her, even if he never returned.

He always spoke as if he would never return.

She waited until his breathing was steady and even, then she got out of bed. The throw rug felt soft against her bare feet. She crossed the rug and knelt in front of the banjo. In all the time she had been with Silas, she had never touched it.

It seemed to shine even more up close, although the moonlight fell away from the banjo and across the bed. She reached out and her fingers brushed the rounded front surface. It was scratchy and hot, not like an instrument at all, but like a living thing.

"Corinne?"

She turned. The moonlight fell across Silas, his hair tousled and the sheets pooled around his naked waist. "What is it, Silas?" she asked. "What's it made of?"

His mouth fell open and he let out a small, quiet sigh. "It's magic, Corinne," he said. "It brings rest, peace, and comfort to the people who hear it."

"You never use it to give me peace," she said.

"I did once." He ran a hand through his thick hair. "When Nathan died."

"I wasn't at peace." The banjo throbbed beneath her hand. "You were going to leave."

He sighed again. "There is only one time when a body can be truly at peace, Corinne."

A glimmer of understanding flashed through her. He was talking about death. Silas had come for Nathan that night, not for her. She was about to grab the idea when she realized why Silas had sounded so sad. She clapped both hands over her mouth. "Silas," she said. "I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. I promise. I'll never—"

He shook his head and got out of bed. He grabbed his pants and slipped them on. "I love you," he said.

She stood up and reached for him. Her fingers slipped right through his arm—or perhaps he had moved away from her as he buttoned his shirt. "I love you, too," she said. "I promise. I'll never ask another question. Just stay, okay?"

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He picked up his banjo. "You'll see me again," he said.

But, as she sat alone in the darkness, she realized that he'd never said he would be back, like he always had in the past. Just a promise that she would see him again.

Although she wouldn't see him again for a long time, not for ten more years.

Corinne stood in front of the crowd. Maxine hadn't wanted to come. "What do I want to see any dumb old death train for?" she had asked. She was fifteen. Corinne had been five when her mother had taken her to a presidential death train. Funny how life repeated itself, adding its own little twists as time went on.

The train slowed as it approached. Its locomotive and passenger cars were draped in black. Flags rested across it as if they mourned too. She had never realized how much a train looked like a coffin.

The train was supposed to pass slowly so that everyone could whisper their goodbyes to the president, McKinley, felled by an assassin's bullet. But, in a screech of brakes and a hiss of steam, the train stopped. The crowd seemed motionless.

A man stepped down from the platform. He was tall and reedy, a banjo slung around his back.

"Silas!" she whispered.

He saw her and smiled.

"You look the same," she said.

The years hadn't touched him, although they had added wrinkles to her eyes and a streak of silver to her hair.

"I know." He stood between her and the old man beside her, close enough, but not close enough to touch. "And I will look the same on the day you die."

"I want you beside me," she said, meaning now, meaning forever.

"I'll be there. No matter how far away you are, I'll be there." He reached out as if to kiss her and then stopped himself. His eyes turned down sadly. He pushed past the old man and started back for the train.

"Silas," Corinne said, grabbing his arm. This time, her fingers did slip through as if he weren't really there at all.

He kept moving. As the train began to chug its way to full power, Silas grabbed the metal railing beside the stairs. "Be strong," he said. "That's what I have always admired about you, Corinne. You're strong."

And then he disappeared. The train eased forward, wheels squealing, and the crowd noises filtered into her ears. Low conversation, sobbing, an occasional sigh. The old man beside her gasped. Corinne stared at the flags, standing out in sharp relief against the train's black iron sides.

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The old man gasped again. She turned. His face was blue and he clutched at his chest.

"What's happening?" someone cried.

"He's dying," Corinne said. The old man collapsed on the platform. People circled around him. Corinne loosened his shirt. As his last breath rattled in his throat, he reached out to her.

Behind her, the train's whistle wailed.

She turned. Despite the pain around her heart, she did not cry as the caboose faded in the gray skies.

She knew she would see Silas one more time. ●

WANDERER

Wanderer, your worn-down boots
track into our placid paths
all innocent of dire intent
but bring a father fear.
The backs of your eyes are lit
still with the embers
of strange suns, your skin
dark with their weather.
Our sons and daughters stare,
they leave their chores undone,
they cluster by the inn door
piled up like jetsam
in the wake of your passage.
Ears straining at your odd accents,
they are drawn willy-nilly
down the trails of your past
into wonders and terrors
before undreamt. Wanderer,
there are alien seeds in the soil
that falls from your boots;
I see them thriving tenacious
as weeds in our familiar fields,
and I fear that their harvest
will be baked into journeybread.

—David Lunde

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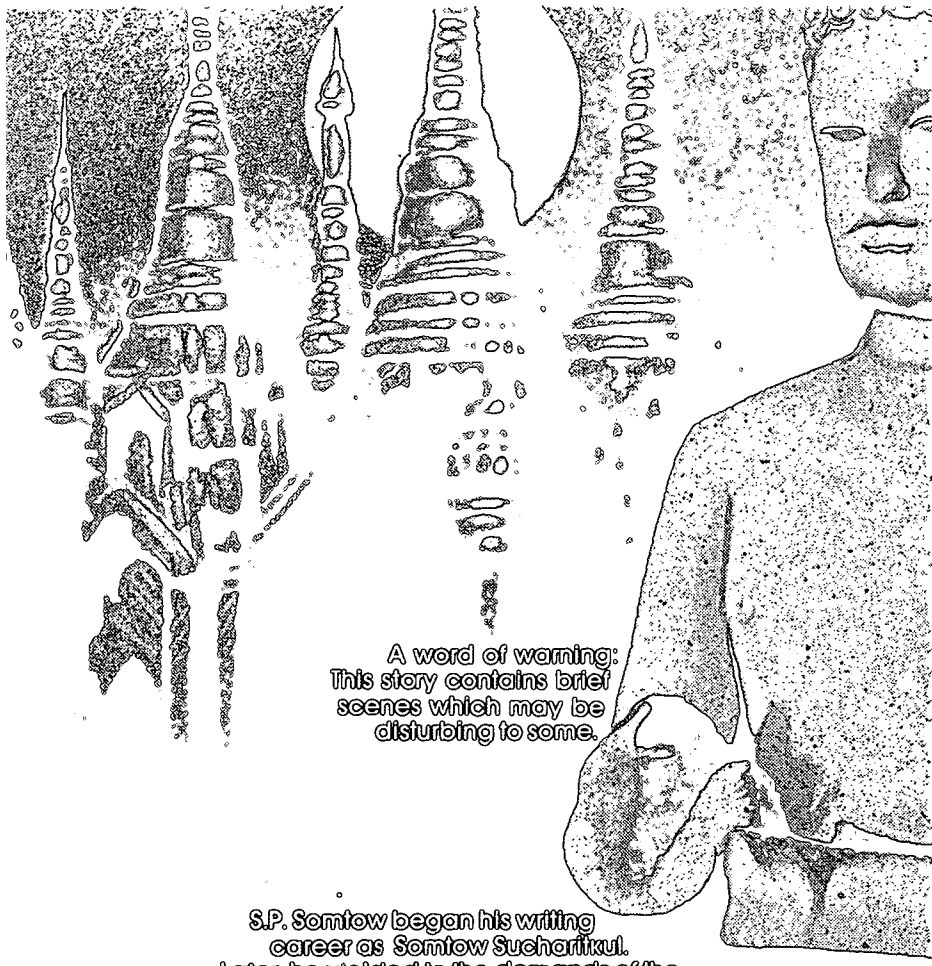

A word of warning:
This story contains brief scenes which may be disturbing to some.

S.P. Somtow began his writing career as Somtow Sucharitkul. Later, he yielded to the demands of the public for something shorter and more pronounceable, and turned his name inside out. The author, whose most recent novel—*Moon Dance*—is available from Tor Books, is also a composer and a film director. His first movie, *The Laughing Dead*, has just been released. One of the film's characters is named "Dozois"—a little in-joke for readers of this magazine.

LOTTERY NIGHT

by S.P. Somtow

art: Laura Lakey

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"You've got everything you need now." My grandmother was even more fidgety than usual; she didn't quite look me in the eye as she fanned herself continually with a folded-over fashion magazine. "Your sleeping bag . . . don't forget that. And insect repellent."

"We've been through it a thousand times," I said, trying to conceal my trepidation at the adventure to come.

"Food—"

"A Snickers bar and a Big Mac," I said. "It's all here." I tapped the brown paper bag. I hoped it wouldn't rain. The air was humid; on the balcony of our high-rise, my little sister Kaew was glued to a soap opera on the portable television—a courtroom scene—and my mother was pounding coconuts.

"I almost forgot . . . the amulets! You mustn't forget the amulets!" My *khun yaai* scrambled up off the floor and hobbled into her room, muttering darkly to herself, just as my father let himself in, took off his shoes and began unbuttoning his khaki police uniform. He glanced at me, squatting in the middle of the room, wishing I could eat the Big Mac now—that was a special treat my Aunt Joom bought for me down at the mall, you could have bought three bowls of noodles for the same price—and immediately began hectoring my mother.

"I really don't understand why we have to send the boy," he said. "Looks like another monsoon shower tonight. I could go myself."

"There's no need to baby him," my little sister piped up. "He's fourteen years old and he 'polishes his rocket' every night."

"I do *not!*" I said. "Well, not every night."

"Wherever did you learn such filthy language, little girl?" my grandmother screeched from the inner room. My father couldn't stop himself from laughing.

My mother patiently pounded coconuts. On television, in the soap opera, the judge was declaring that the two-headed daughter of the peasant woman was the rightful heir to the Petchari millions, and the lawyer had just revealed that he was actually the god Indra in disguise.

"I mean, honored mother of my wife," my father went on, after he had recovered from laughing, "I *am* the patriarch of this family, and it's only proper if there's any favor to be sought from the venerable ancestors, *I* should be the one to—"

"Don't be silly," my grandmother said, coming back in with a tray of amulets. My father quickly ducked so that his head would not be higher than hers. "In the first place, it's your doing that we're reduced to these present straits; in the second, he was her favorite great-great-nephew; in the third, you know very well that your Great-Aunt Snit hated your guts. She couldn't even stand to be in the same room as you when she

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was alive. Why on earth would she want to tell you a winning lottery number?"

"Even so," my father said, "the dead can be propitiated with the right gifts . . . and . . . and that was *years* ago, and it was because she was senile and kept mistaking me for the man who jilted her for an Indian woman."

My mother strained the pulped coconut through a cheesecloth and poured some of the juice into a *Batman* glass for my sister to drink. "We can't take any chances," she said. There was a sad finality in her voice, and my father sat down sulkily on a floor cushion.

"It's all superstition anyway," he said. "If everyone could win the lottery by sleeping in a cemetery and having some charitable ghost whisper the winning number in a dream . . . why, everybody'd be a millionaire! Some of those graveyards get more crowded than the kick-boxing stadium on Wednesday nights . . . and speaking of *chok muai*. . . . " He stalked out to the balcony and started to twiddle the channel. The shrill snarl of the war oboe filled the air, punctuated by the pounding of drums. He turned the volume up so high it even drowned out the traffic.

"Oh, please, *khun poh!* I wanna see what happens to the two-headed—" my sister started whining.

"Shut up. I've got a lot of money riding on the red tonight."

My mother and grandmother looked at each other and rolled their eyes. To me, it was just one more indication of our desperate plight. My father had faithfully gambled on the blue for ten years.

"The amulets," my grandmother said. She lifted each one in turn, held it in between her palms in an attitude of reverence. As my father farted and belched in the background, she enumerated their virtues: "Here's an old and very powerful *luangpoh* I acquired from a Chinaman who makes his living gambling on cockfights . . . here's an amethyst *pohng-kham* that was dug up in Chiang Rai . . . " She put each one around my neck and ran through a couple of mantras appropriate to each. "Are you sure you'll be all right with all this American food?" she said. "I don't want you getting diarrhea in a graveyard in the middle of the night. You might attract a *phii krasue*."

I shuddered. For the first time it occurred to me that tonight's outing wasn't just another boyish lark—it was to be an encounter with the supernatural world that surrounds us all. No one wants to attract a *phii krasue*. Many *phii krasue* are seductively beautiful at first—until they lose their heads. We'd had one in the family once, my great-great-great-uncle Noi, whose bad karma had caused him to be reincarnated as one of these vile creatures. I had been raised on tales of how his head used to detach itself from his body, and, dragging the slimy guts behind it, would slither around the family compound using its tongue as a pseu-

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dopod. *Phii krasue* live entirely on shit, of course, and there was a practical side to having a malevolent spirit of this sort around in those olden days without indoor plumbing; but as soon as my family had been able to afford a toilet, back in the late 1950s, my grandmother had an exorcist brought in to propel my multi-uncle on to the next world.

This was long before I was born; I had never seen the much-vaunted village home, never even so much as set foot beyond the city limits of Bangkok except when we went to the beach; then again, everyone knows there is nothing worthwhile outside the City-of-Angels-the-Divine-and-Great-Metropolis-Etc.-Etc.

My grandmother finished bedecking me with amulets and was now blessing me. My father was still absorbed in his boxing match; my mother was in the kitchen, praying to a plaster reproduction of the Emerald Buddha that sat in a niche above the refrigerator, next to the photographs of Their Divine Majesties. The smell of burning joss-sticks wafted through the living room. I closed my eyes, trying to achieve a state of *samadhi* before setting out on this pilgrimage that might mean the difference between the family retreating to the boondocks or moving to a more upscale condominium on Sukhumvit.

In the midst of my reverie I heard my grandmother singing. It was an old lullaby from the village in a hick dialect, but it was strangely soothing. A mood of profound inner *shanti* swept over me, but it was soon disrupted by the sound of my elders arguing.

"I really should drive him down to the cemetery myself," my father was saying.

"Don't be a fool," said my grandmother. "That old Datsun pickup of yours won't make it past the edge of the *soi*."

"Yes, but I could take him in my police car," said my father, "and maybe get a couple of hundred baht in traffic bribes on my way home."

"How crass," said *khun yaai*.

"I'll take the bus," I said. "The *soi* is flooded anyway."

I didn't want a ride from my father because I had a secret errand or two to do on the way to the cemetery where *Khun Chuad* Snit's remains had lain since the time of the Divine King Chulalongkorn. I needed time to get in the right state of mind; I wanted to eat the Big Mac; and I had a mind to see if my American friend, Joey Friedberg, wanted to come along.

The *soi* was completely flooded from yesterday's monsoon outburst and I had to take a boat to the main road at a cost of two baht. I was dressed in my best—I didn't want to feel ashamed in front of my ancestors—a Ralph Lauren shirt from the best counterfeiter in town, a gold Rolex that would've fooled Mr. Rolex himself. I didn't want to ruin my clothes, so

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instead of climbing up the drainage pipe to get into Joey's apartment, I actually rang at the front gate. My Aunt Joom, who worked for the Friedbergs as a maid or something, buzzed me in.

The first thing I heard was the television. Traditional *ranaat* music filled the living room. It was one of those cultural programs that are only watched by old people and American anthropologists. You see, the Friedbergs were a very unusual species of American. Like real people, they didn't wear shoes in the house, and instead of going to ISB, Joey actually went to a Thai school. Joey's mother made a living entirely by writing scholarly papers about our national peculiarities, for which the Ford Foundation supplied everything: the apartment, the servants, the chauffeur. (She had even done a fifty-page monograph analyzing all the Sanskrit components of the true name of the City of Angels the Divine Metropolis Etc. Etc., which is, of course, the only city whose name is so long it is always written with two "Etc."s.) She didn't appear to have a husband. At the moment, Mrs. Friedberg was having Aunt Joom walk back and forth across the living room striking various statuesque poses, and taking endless snapshots.

"Oh, Samraan," she called out to me, confusing me a bit, because I wasn't used to being called by my True Name, "Joey'll be right out . . . Joom, *undulate* a bit more, will ya? . . . beautiful, beautiful."

Joey came out of his bedroom. He was loaded down with gear: compasses, Swiss army knives, canteens, dangling all over his gangly frame. We stood for a while, transfixed by Aunt Joom's virtuoso performance. She was wiggling her hips, fluttering her eyelids, and slithering sinuously across the room as the lanky Mrs. Friedberg snapped furiously away, leaping over sofas and climbing onto credenzas, to get the best possible angles.

"Rad!" said Joey.

"Totally," I said in English, impressed in spite of myself.

"The illusion is complete," Joey said, switching to Thai.

"I've known her all my life, and I *still* can hardly tell she isn't a woman," I said.

Aunt Joom paused for a breath. "Let me get you a Coke," she said to me.

"You really don't have to, Joom dear," said Mrs. Friedberg. "You're not a servant, you know." Nonetheless, Joom minced off to the kitchen, every inch the proper serving maid, though the nuances of her servility were doubtless lost on her mistress. Mrs. Friedberg sighed. "I can't wait to get these pictures developed."

"What're they for, Mom?"

"Oh, it's a paper called '*Katoey*: transvestitism in the resonating contexts of contemporary Thai society.' " She shook her long red hair into

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place and noticed me at last. Joey and I stood side by side. My friend was, of course, much taller than me, and his height was further accentuated by his immaculately spiked blond hair. He limped a bit, and one arm was longer than the other; it was from an car accident he'd been in when he was five that had put him in a coma for a year. He wore a neon pink T-shirt that depicted a surfing triceratops. "Going camping, dears?" Mrs. Friedberg said to us.

"Aw, c'mon, Mom," said Joey. "I told you all about it, didn't I? Like, it's lottery night—tomorrow's the last day to buy lottery tickets—and we're spending the night at the tomb of Samraan's *Khun Chuad* Snit!"

"Oh, ah . . . right! The business about sleeping in a graveyard and getting winning lottery numbers from ghosts, right? Interesting example of cultural syncretism . . . gotta do a paper on it sometime . . . well, be careful, dears," she said, "and Joey, maybe you can do some field notes or something." Absently, she handed him a five-hundred-baht note. White people never know the value of money.

I closed my eyes and thought of the ordeal to come. It was a bad idea to bring Joey, I thought. Even though I'd promised, even though he and his mother were almost like Thai people. I was going to end up as a footnote in Mrs. Friedberg's dissertation and even Joey wasn't going to take the spirits seriously . . . maybe they'd be so angry at my bringing a *farang* that they wouldn't materialize at all. I found myself attempting to put myself back into a state of *samadhi* . . . without thinking, I began to hum the lullaby my grandmother had sung to me earlier that day.

When I opened my eyes again, Mrs. Friedberg was staring at me, wide-eyed. "Why, Samraan, that was such a curious, *wonderful* song . . . what was it?"

"Just . . . a song, Mrs. Friedberg. My grandmother's . . . "

"From the provinces?"

I was suddenly embarrassed at having betrayed the hick origins of my family. I don't know why I was so sensitive about losing face; they wouldn't have understood anyway. I didn't know what to say, so I just stared at the floor.

"Does your grandmother know any more of those songs? Ya know, the Ford Foundation's shelling out mega-shekels for ethnomusicology these days—"

"Right, Mom, later," Joey said, rolling his eyes. He just couldn't wait to be out of there.

As we reached the door, we heard Mrs. Friedberg's final admonishment: "And don't get stoned!"

"Who's she fucking kidding?" Joey said to me, pulling a reefer out of his pocket just as we reached the corner of Soi Jintana and the main road. We were on higher ground and the water was only ankle deep.

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Banana trees lined the walls of the apartment complex. The sun was setting behind veils of smog; the odors of gasoline and night-blooming jasmine wafted across the skyline of high-rises and silhouetted pagodas. Traffic screeched endlessly by and we had to wait ten minutes before we could safely jaywalk the intersection. At the corner, a withered Indian hawked lottery tickets.

"Not yet," I said. "Not until tomorrow."

"I can't wait," Joey said. A pretty young prostitute of indeterminate gender accosted him, and he yelled back, "*Hii men meuan turian kuan!!*"

"*Ai haa*! You can't say things like that!" The irate whore was coming after us, swinging her purse. She was making straight for me—of course, it hadn't occurred to her that it was the *farang* boy calling her names.

"Duck!" I grabbed Joey's arm and pushed him into an alley.

"Didn't I get it right?" he said as he lit up.

"Of course you got it right," I said, "but you can't just go around telling someone her pussy smells like a puréed durian fruit and hope to get away with—"

"Shit!" he said, laughing too loud. "She's fuckin' gaining on us!" Wielding the purse with deadly accuracy, the woman fetched me a hefty clout on the side of the head. Joey yanked me into the back doorway of a crowded noodle shop, and we dived under a table and scrambled through the forest of diners' legs to reach the front door.

A bus appeared and we ran wildly after it. About a dozen people were hanging on the door and the bus careened at a forty-five degree angle as it rounded a corner. As we hopped on board, the prostitute tripped over a stray dog and sprawled into a sidewalk noodle vendor. We hung out of the side of the bus, clutching the door-pole with one hand, our legs trailing the traffic as we wove lurching through the ooze of jam-packed cars, glinting in the sunset like the scales of a giant serpent.

"Why do I always have to rescue you, little brother?" Joey said.

"Fuck off," I said in English, "and don't call me 'little brother'." Joey might be my best friend, but that didn't give him the right to count me as his relative. Foreigners never know their place.

My great-great-aunt's tomb was in a pretty out-of-the-way *tambol* of the City of Etc. Etc. In the days when Great-great-aunt Snit had been cremated and her ashes interred there, there was this temple in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by paddy fields. Now there were a few signs of development; beside the temple was the skeleton of a shopping mall-in-progress, and there was a half-built overpass hulking over the cemetery. There was a palatial movie theater across the street from the cemetery. It was showing *Aliens*; a thirty-foot-tall statue of the H.R. Giger monster welcomed the patrons, its mechanized jaws opening and

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closing to the strains of a Michael Jackson song. At its entrance, a bunch of kids hawked boxes of incense sticks and candles in case someone might want to make a quick offering at the shrine across the street.

"Hey, maybe we can go to the movie first," Joey said. "We've got all night."

"I don't know why I ever brought you along." He just wasn't taking this seriously enough. And my whole family's fate at stake! "You're only going to embarrass me."

"Embarrass you? How come you're so sure *you're* going to get a revelation from the spirits? How do you know they won't come to *me?*"

"They don't speak English."

"But they're supernatural beings, right? They probably all know English. They probably don't even speak real languages—they're probably all telepaths."

"They won't come to you, Joey, because . . . because . . . they don't *have* spirits in America. They don't have reincarnation and stuff. In America, people just die and turn to dust."

"The Friedbergs aren't like other Americans. We're liberals."

"And how, pray, are the supernatural beings to know that? You all look alike to them."

"Fuckin' bigot," he said in English, and slapped a mosquito.

By now we had crossed the street and reached the gate of the cemetery, and I was experiencing real dread. It was all very well hearing all one's life that I was the favorite great-nephew of this long-dead woman, but my only memory of her was that of a white-haired, cadaverous figure with a face like a skeleton and teeth blackened from betel nut, sitting cross-legged in the shadows, screeching abuse at any family member who passed by without showing appropriate obeisance. I had been ushered into her presence perhaps three or four times; each time it was either my birthday or New Year's Day. I would prostrate myself at her feet, as was proper for such a momentous occasion, with such a venerable ancestor, and look up into her fierce sunken eyes, and she would hand me a little velvet bag containing a little spending money.

"Getting big," she would say. "Getting big, aren't you, tadpole! Can you talk yet?"

I could, of course, but she was too senile to realize it, and besides, I was too scared to utter a word in her exalted presence. Her house smelled of sandalwood and of the scented paste old women put on their faces to soften their skin.

She died before my fifth birthday; the funeral was a lot of fun, with all my favorite foods, including Mr. Donut, which had just opened in Siam Square and was the biggest craze of 1979 among the young.

The cemetary had a wrought-iron gate in a design of angelic *thephan-*

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oms with folded palms. Joey leaped up and vaulted over; much to my annoyance, I had to have help from him to get over. It seemed to get dark the minute our feet touched the ground. The walls of the cemetery cut off the brash neon lights of the movie theaters and the noodle shops. The air was thick with mosquitoes. "Here," I said, breaking out the insect repellent, "use this." We stood in the shadow of the wall for a while, rubbing our arms and legs with the nasty-smelling liquid from the British Dispensary. The last of the sunlight died.

Joey turned on his flashlight. "Well, we'd better find the tomb," he said. I started to walk toward where I thought the path was. I bumped into a gravestone. A temple dog howled in the distance, and I smelled incense. Joey found me, led me toward the gravel pathway. As our eyes got more used to the darkness, three low pagodas appeared in the middle distance, bathed in moonlight and faint reflected neon. "C'mon, little brother," said Joey.

I started to cuss him out, but I remembered in time that I was in a sacred place. I murmured a quick prayer to the Lord Buddha, hoping it would compensate for my impiety. We walked on. The pagodas never seemed to get any nearer. The insects twittered and keened and made it hard to think. We walked on. Out of the insect voices came a persistent rhythmic buzzing, and I suddenly realized that it came from Joey. He was listening to his Walkman. "Depêche Mode!" He was shouting, as those with earphones are wont to do. His voice echoed. I saw rows and rows of white marble tombs and I realized that I had become very frightened.

"Respect the dead," I said, yanking away his headphones.

We walked on.

The path turned. There was another kind of music now, high-pitched, tinkly. We must be getting close to our goal. I heard footsteps. Froze in my tracks. Soft, padding footsteps on gravel. Something was approaching! Some*one* . . . in a long, white robe, with long white hair . . . moving ineluctably in our direction . . . humming weirdly. . . .

"C'mon," Joey said. "Maybe he knows the way."

"He's p-p-probably a—"

The figure stopped. "Please excuse me," he said in a thick Indian accent, "I am having lost my way. Are you not the two gentlemen who ordered an exorcism?"

"Awesome!" said Joey.

"No . . . we're here for the lottery."

"Oh . . . second fork on the left is where most of the lottery dream-seekers are, isn't it?" he said. "But where, oh where are those customers of mine?"

"What kind of exorcism are you doing?" Joey said.

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"Oh . . . no major thing," said the Brahmin priest, ". . . just a little matter of a *phii krasue* that has gotten out of hand . . . in her former life, my client's sister-in-law, Khun Mayurii, doomed to wander the earth in this hideous shape because of some unflattering remarks she once made concerning a minor functionary of His Divine Majesty's Ministry of the Interior."

"What terrible karma," I said, shaking my head in rueful sympathy.

"Well, sirs, if you should ever need any help along those lines . . . " he solemnly removed a card from his robes and handed it to me. I read: "Shri Narayan Dass: houses blessed, exorcisms, scrying, love potions, and general astrology; reasonable rates."

"Quite a racket," Joey said.

"Don't be disrespectful!" I said. "Don't you see he's a spirit doctor, a *mo phii*?"

"No, the young *farang* boy is being quite correct," said Shri Narayan Dass. "It *is* something of a racket, but it beats selling polyester in Pahurat to the nouveau riche." He fished something else out of his capacious robes—it was a length of cotton rope. "Take this *saisin*," he said. "That should stave off the more egregious evil spirits."

I thanked him humbly and watched him leave the path and shamble, muttering incantations, into the darkness.

"Jesus," Joey said, "that dude could really clean up on the Beverly Hills guru circuit. Why are exorcists always Indians, anyways?"

"They must have ancient secrets which the Thais, people of a modern kingdom, have lost," I said, wondering about this for the first time.

We followed the exorcist's instructions, and presently we reached the oldest part of the cemetery, where my great-great-aunt's ashes were. As my father had predicted, it was a madhouse. There was a Porsche parked on the grass beside one ostentatious monument, and a woman in black was praying hysterically beside it, weeping and shrieking imprecations in Chinese. There was hardly a tomb without a straw mat laid out next to it and someone desperately trying to sleep or slapping mosquitoes. There was a woman hawking meatballs on skewers with chili sauce as well as lottery tickets. A man in a pair of silk pajamas was watching a *Twilight Zone* episode on a portable television set. The fragrance of incense melded with the stagnant odor of a nearby canal.

Where was my great-great-aunt's tomb? Every New Year I had paid my respects there with the rest of my family. In daylight I could have found it in my sleep, but now everything looked different. I wandered around in circles while Joey went off to buy food.

It was maddening. The place was getting more and more crowded by the minute. Suddenly I heard Joey cry out, "This way!"

"You've never been here before." Angrily, I stalked toward him.

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His eyes were glazed over. "Something awesome's happening . . . like, déjà vu, dude! I've been here before! I remember . . . Jesus, I remember—"

"Control yourself!" He must have smoked that entire joint while I was looking the other way.

"I know the way, I'm telling you!" he said, jumping up and down. He dragged me past the food vendor toward—

"Tadpole!" A familiar voice. It was Aunt Joom. "How nice to see you!"

She was wearing an embroidered silk sarong, gold bracelets, necklaces and earrings, and pancake makeup an inch thick. She had been praying at a tomb. As Aunt Joom got up from her prostrate position with a chillingly feminine wiggle of the hips, I could see *Khun Chuad* Snit's photograph, a frayed black-and-white thing in a gold-bordered frame, in the light of Aunt Joom's votive candles. I was infuriated to learn that Joey had been right about the location of the monument.

"Oh, don't worry, darling," said Aunt Joom, as she applied yet another layer of lipstick, "I'm not here to steal your lottery dream. Your great-great-aunt never much liked me anyway. It's the exorcism, you know . . . across the way. Khun Phairoj, who's hired the priciest Brahmin to help rid his sister-in-law of the curse of—"

"We met him," Joey interjected.

"Well, he made a pledge to the Four-Faced-Brahma shrine next to the Erawan hotel that, if the exorcism worked, he'd have a troupe of dancers immediately perform 'The dance of the celestial chickens' . . . well, a group of us girls is standing by in case everything works out as planned."

"I see." I wasn't surprised; transvestites are always in demand as dancers, as they can switch roles with ease.

"Just don't sleep next to me," Joey jested.

Aunt Joom laughed. "We *katoeys* always make white people queasy, I don't know why. But while I'm here . . . why don't I buy you some meatballs? You look like you're starving."

"I've got your Big Mac," I said.

"You should have eaten it right away. That stuff will give you Reagan's revenge if you let it sit."

"I'd love some meatballs," said Joey, and the two of them went off, hand in hand, cracking obscene jokes about meatballs, leaving me alone with my Big Mac, my Snickers bar, and the spirits of my ancestors.

First I took out the *saisin* the exorcist had given me—better safe than sorry. I looped it around some bushes so that the cord made a sacred circle around my great-great-aunt's memorial. It was past midnight. The carnival atmosphere had subsided. It was time for serious business, communion with the supernatural. The moon had disappeared behind a high-

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rise that towered over the temple wall. In the distance, the exorcism was going on; most of the crowd, including my aunt, had gone to watch, leaving only the dedicated lottery-dreamers. Joey, stuffed with *luk chin* in chili sauce, had gone to sleep with his Walkman, and there was a buzz of Metallica coming from around his head.

Carefully I lit seven joss-sticks and seven candles. I arranged the candles beneath my great-great-aunt's photograph. I lifted my folded palms to my lips and murmured a prayer to the Lord Buddha, then hung a *puangmalai* wreath of jasmine petals across the tombstone. Soft sounds in the night: the stridulant crickets and the snoring dreamers, the far-off music of the exorcism and the farther-off traffic along the overpass. As far as I could see, I was the only one awake. I was alone, the still center of the crowded city.

What was I to say to my great-great-aunt?

I gazed at the photograph in its brass frame. I had seen the picture before—we had one like it in a family album at home—but it was nothing like the withered betel-nut-chewing crone of my childhood memories. This was a young woman. Her hair was like a woman on a videotape box I'd once seen at Joey's house—Claudette Colbert in *Cleopatra*. She wore Western-style clothes—the height of 1920s fashion—and I remembered that she had once been the third minor wife of a provincial functionary of the government of His Divine Majesty the Sixth Rama. We'd been somebody back in those days! Our karma had certainly taken a sad turn for the worse, with my father forced to eke out a living collecting bribes from traffic violators, unable to afford the down payment even on a one-room condominium.

I put my hands together in the *phnom mue* gesture and addressed the photograph in tones of deepest humility: "Great-great-aunt," I said, "things really aren't going too well for your descendants at the moment."

Light flickered. Had the photograph been smiling a moment before? Somehow the monument seemed taller, the fragrance of incense more pungent. I felt a chill. There were spirits present. Somewhere. The cold tickled the base of my spine even though it was a hot tropical night and the dark air pregnant with impending rain. The cold moved up the small of my back.

"Great-great-aunt!" I said. "You're frightening me! Don't you remember me, the one you used to give the little bags of money to twice a year?" The photograph wavered . . . or was it the candlelight, the wisps of incense? "Listen, we really have to win that lottery," I said urgently. "We're getting farther and farther behind on the rent. My father drinks too much and he spends the rest of his money gambling on boxers. I know you don't like my grandmother because she accused you of being a whore for agreeing to be the mistress of a government official but it was just

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your ticket out of the village and into the provincial capital—and it wasn't her fault your husband died of syphilis! I know you always thought my father was a layabout, and I know how disappointed you were that my mother married him . . . but it's all karma anyway. So show compassion to me, honored great-great-aunt, and even if you don't tell me the number for the jackpot, at least give us one of the lesser prizes, enough to scrape by for a month or two while my father gets his life back together again."

A peal of thunder made me jump. I looked around, panicking. Joey was still asleep. A slithering sound in the grass nearby. A snake? I listened. Only the crickets. I made sure that the protective *saisin* was securely fastened. No evil spirit would dare profane such a barrier. I listened carefully again. No snakes . . . only the moist wind rifling the leaves of the mango trees next to the cemetery wall.

"*Khun Chuad?*" I said. "Are you listening to me?"

There was thunder, more distant. My heart was thumping. The grass was whispering. I unrolled the sleeping bag and lay on it with my head propped up against the stone. My stomach growled. I was getting nervous. I wolfed down the candy bar and the cold Big Mac. I could hear the chanting of the exorcist, somewhere far away. I burped. "Excuse me," I whispered, hoping that my venerable ancestor would not take offense. "I shouldn't have eaten my food so fast. Grandmother is always telling me to chew slowly—"

I stopped.

There was someone standing just beyond the *saisin* . . . a woman. She was young. A strange perfume emanated from her. She wore a traditional *phasin* of black silk. Her lips were red and glossy, her hair done in that 1920s flapper style . . . she was a living, breathing incarnation of the photograph of my great-great-aunt Shit. And yet . . .

"My favorite grand-nephew," she said. Very softly. Shook her head. The moonlight danced in her soft dark hair. "Come to me . . . I always loved you best."

There was something not quite right about her. . . .

My heartbeat quickened. I felt hot and cold all over and suddenly I realized I was beginning to get an erection. I breathed in perfume mingled with incense and it intoxicated me. How could this be? I got up . . . took a tentative step towards her. . . .

Something grabbed my foot.

"Joey! Let go!"

"Stay inside the sacred circle, you idiot!"

"But it's my great-great—"

He leaped off his sleeping bag, tried to restrain me. I freed myself. The vision of my ancestor shimmered in the humid air. He lurched after me

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but his limp made him trip over a stone. Just as I reached the *saisin,* he managed to get hold of my ankles. I reached out my arms toward the woman as she floated toward me in a cloud of mist. Her eyes glittered. She grasped my hands . . . she was cold . . . colder than ice . . . I screamed.

At that moment, with my friend trying to pull me back into the circle and the spirit trying to pull me out, I felt the first pangs of Reagan's revenge. I could have died of embarrassment. I looked up into eyes that were glowing like charcoal embers. The hands gripped tighter, burning my wrists. Joey tugged with all his might, his back against the tomb.

"Let go, one of you," I gasped. "Or I'll crap in my pants!"

"Don't do that!" Joey shouted. "Can't you see, that's exactly what it *wants* you to do!"

I didn't think I could hold it for another second. I was going to defile my great-great-aunt's tomb and I was never going to receive her blessing now. I had to get away . . . find a good spot, maybe among the mango trees. . . .

I wriggled free of Joey and was pulled across the sacred cord. No sooner was I clear of its protection than I saw that the hands that gripped me were no hands . . . they were the slimy, prehensile tongue of a *phii krasue*! "The Lord Buddha protect me!" I said. The tongue tightened its hold, squeezing my arms like a hungry python. I could see the face. Bits of skull showed through the torn flesh. The *phii krasue*'s oesophagus and intestines flailed about on the grass like a mass of serpents.

"Get back inside the circle!" Joey screamed. I turned around. Rising from the tomb in a miasma of candlelit incense fumes was the skeletal form of Great-great-aunt Snit! The ghost looked at me, its finger pointing straight at me, and I felt all the terror I'd felt when I was three years old and being ushered into her presence, and I knew I was going to shit myself but I didn't dare do so . . .

Where was Joey? He was nowhere to be seen. His voice had been coming from the place where my great-great-aunt's ghost now stood, her shroud flapping in the wind. The *phii krasue*'s intestines were inching up my leg. I couldn't move my hands. I struggled. Sweat was pouring down my neck and mingling with the creature's slime. My wrists were getting so slick that the demon's tongue was losing its purchase. I managed to ease my hand toward my chest, reached into my shirt, pulled out one of my grandmother's amulets.

The *phii krasue* screamed! The tongue slithered away and on the creature's forehead was a fuming burn mark in the shape of the Lord Buddha! I got up as the evil spirit tumbled onto the grass. The scream was waking up all the lottery dreamers. Flashlights were coming on all around me. The pain was pounding at my abdomen. I was flushed with embarrass-

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ment. The *phii krasue* circled me warily, now and then trying to lasso my ankles with its tongue.

"The Lord Buddha preserve us! It's a *phii krasue*!" someone shouted. My writhing assailant and I stood in a pool of flashlight beams.

"How dare you wake me up?" came another voice from behind another tombstone. "I've two more digits to go!"

"Joey!" I screamed. But Joey was not there. In his place loomed the specter of my great-great-aunt, impassively watching me in my shame.

I had to find a bush, a tree, some secluded spot—

I started to run.

"It's after the boy!" someone shouted.

"It must be that spirit they've been exorcizing down at the other end of the cemetery."

"After it!"

I ran. Tripping over gravestones, stopping now and then to brandish an amulet behind me. Others were right behind me . . . some waving their own amulets, some there just to enjoy the spectacle . . . the meatball vendor was back too, cheerfully hawking as we ran. I sprinted, clutching my stomach.

Voices in the distance . . . there was the exorcism in full swing, by the side of the canal! There was Shri Narayan Dass on a dais above the throng, sitting in the lotus position in his white exorcizing robes, chanting up a storm, with clouds of incense whirling about his face. Statues of Hindu gods glared down from a plinth behind him. Sacred exorcizing music, tinkling xylophones and wailig oboes, poured out of a portable CD player. I saw Aunt Joom, in her dancing costume, ready to go on; Khun Phairoj, the sponsor of the exorcism, sat in a big rattan chair, a fat man looking even fatter in his white Yves St. Laurent suit. A length of *saisin* cord wound round and round the nearby trees and through the folded palms of all the celebrants in the ritual. The exorcist was in the throes of a *khao song*, foaming at the mouth and spewing forth sublimely incomprehensible utterances as the spirits of celestial beings held his *vinyaan* in thrall.

In the throes of a somewhat more earthly need, I hardly had time to take in the splendor of the situation . . . although I did notice Mrs. Friedberg in the audience, holding the *saisin* in one hand while feverishly taking notes with the other.

It was Aunt Joom who saw me first. "It's Samraan! And the *phii krasue* is after him!" she shrieked.

The screaming became contagious. Panicking, people were crawling over each other in their haste to reach the gate. Aunt Joom, wringing her hands, stood looking this way and that. "Aunt Joom . . . I've got Reagan's revenge!" I screamed. "That's why it's after me!"

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Suddenly there came an eerie voice from high above, from the platform on which the spirit doctor had been meditating. "You must now be running toward me!" came the spirit doctor's voice, high-pitched, ethereal, plaintive. "Come to me . . . "

I stumbled forward with the *phii krasue* hobbling my left leg. The creature's clammy tongue slid up and down my calf. The exorcist came stomping down the steps, holding aloft an image of a many-headed Hindu deity. With his other hand he twirled a length of *saisin,* like a bullroper in a western. An acolyte struggled to keep up, carrying a huge silver bowl of lustral water. Behind him came the crowd. I could hardly breathe as the wet tongue twined around my stomach.

They were all around me now . . . how could Joey be sleeping through all this? . . . cheering on the exorcist as he bore down on the monster and me. Dipping a sheaf of twigs into the lustral water, intoning a sacred prayer to Yama, the god of the underworld, Shri Narayan Dass began asperging us both. The chanting crescendoed.

"Be at peace now, evil spirit! Go and be reborn in a decent human shape!"

With each shower, I felt the creature shudder, its grip tightening. I tried to scream but only a squawk came out. Finally the exorcist, standing over us as we thrashed, began flagellating us with the sacred twigs, chanting wildly, foaming at the mouth, his eyes completely white.

The crowd gasped. The *phii krasue* began to scream . . . a heartrending cry, the cry of a woman in pain . . . I felt the intestines relax their hold on me. I turned. Smoke billowed upward toward the moon. The sacred waters struck me; I felt all my uncleanness melt from me . . . I slid onto the grass . . . I saw the monster slowly begin to transform into the corpse of a beautiful woman . . . Khun Mayurii, the unfortunate woman whose karma had caused her to walk the earth as the lowliest of demons. . . .

I heard Aunt Joom's voice from somewhere in the throng. "For the sake of mercy, give the boy something to eat!" That was the last thing I wanted. I lay on my back, against the soft earth, watching the clouds stream across the face of the moon. A few more drops fell on my face . . . surely not the lustral waters. No. The monsoon was about to break. We were all going to be drenched. A few more drops. People were murmuring, looking hastily around for shelter, and I could see Khun Phairoj, kneeling, weeping beside the body of his late sister-in-law.

It was at that moment that I saw Joey Friedberg. He was walking slowly toward me out of the darkness. He walked strangely, with the grace of a woman. He wasn't walking at all. He was gliding. Floating toward me on a carpet of mist.

"Joey," I said softly, "how could you have slept through all that? The exorcism—the *phii krasue*—"

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"Samraan," Joey said. It was a haunting voice, a voice out of some past life . . . the voice of a beautiful woman, rich against the patter of impending rain.

"Joey—you didn't turn into a *katoey,* did you?" It had never occurred to me that the Americans had any people like my Aunt Joom.

"No, my child. . . ."

"You're possessed!"

"You're dreaming," Joey said, and enveloped me in incense fumes. The corpse of Khun Mayurii was melting and the people around about us were draining into the dark sky. He took me by the hand—his hand was soft and caked with perfume-powder—and led me out of my body. We climbed up the tombstones and climbed to the clouds on a staircase of heavenly rain. The gates of the sky swung open and I saw winged *apsaras* on lotus pads, singing in endless praise of Phra Indra, King of Heaven, each one with breasts glistening like ripe mangoes after rainfall. Music of celestial xylophones mingled with Metallica from Joey's Walkman.

"I am not what I seem to be," Joey said, looking into my eyes.

Suddenly I realized that he had become imbued with the *vinyaan* of my great-great-aunt. Appalled at my previous rudeness, I fell down prostrate at the nearest cloudbank and placed my palms between his feet. "*Sadhu, sadhu,* honored ancestor" I said piteously, "don't be mad at me because I didn't recognize you straight away. Please look with favor upon our family's distress . . . "

Joey Friedberg looked off into the distance. Far away, silhouetted against the moon, was a pavilion. I could see gods and angels moving against the moonlight as in a shadow play. I could see the cemetery below us. Dozens of people had sought shelter under the mango trees. The exorcist stood, waving his arms, intoning over the place where the *phii krasue* had fallen. Khun Phairoj was summoning the dancers; he had pledged a dance of thanksgiving, and rain or no rain the dance would now have to occur. Aunt Joom and the other transvestites, in their soggy finery, were coming out into the rain. There was some kind of altercation; but presently the music started up, and the *katoeys* danced—though the grace of their movements was somewhat hampered by their umbrellas. In heaven, too, there was dancing; apsaras flitted by, strewing us with jasmine petals, and we were bathed in sourceless light.

"I could give you the winning lottery number if I really wanted to," said *Khun Chuad* Snit, "but the wheel of karma moves in mysterious ways, and even if I told it to you, it wouldn't make any difference."

The ways of dead people are not our ways. They have a very oblique way of expressing themselves, and often they'll tell you something that can be interpreted many ways; it gives them a way out while preserving

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their reputation for infallibility. Nevertheless, I asked her what she meant.

"Joey Friedberg will take care of you," she said. My American friend twitched, as though he were trying to dislodge my great-great-aunt's *vinyaan.*

"Why Joey?" I said. I didn't want him taking care of me. It was an annoying habit of his that I'd been trying to wean him of since knowing him.

"Well you may ask," she said. "But you see, I *am* Joey Friedberg."

"You *are*—"

"He is my reincarnation."

"Oh, come on! That's the dumbest thing I ever heard. They don't even *have* reincarnation in America!"

"Now, now," she said, and smiled through Joey's lips, the smile of an indulgent old woman. "All living things are part of the eternal cycle of karma . . . I must admit that I was a little nonplussed to find myself being reborn in the body of a *farang,* but then I'm afraid I did a terrible thing in my last life. . . . "

I listened in horrified fascination, eager to learn what monstrous crime she had committed to be reincarnated so far from the City of Angels the Divine Metropolis Etc. Etc. "I killed a cockroach," she said ruefully.

"But everyone kills cockroaches!"

"Ah, but this particular cockroach happened to be a reincarnation of my grandfather, you see. One must always be very careful about the wanton destruction of life; one never knows who it might be. Think about it next time you step on an ant."

"But . . . Great-great-aunt Snit . . . Joey's older than me! How could he possibly be you? You died after he was born . . . " I had her there, I thought. She'd never talk her way out of that one.

"The fact of the matter is, I spent quite a while in the underworld, going through the usual tortures, being punished for the usual minor offenses like adultery and so on. There is in the underworld an enormous chamber, something like a border immigration center, where the new souls come in. I happened to be in charge of the—as it were—immigrant register one day, when they brought in the soul of a young American boy who was in a car accident. He had been in a coma for a year, and his soul had been flitting back and forth at the border of the kingdom of death. He was crying and carrying on so, but I couldn't send him back; the dictates of Yama, the Death Lord, are irreversible. I prostrated myself before His Dread Majesty and said, 'But my Lord, there *is* a loophole. The boy's brain is dead, and the *farang,* in their mechanistic way, consider him gone for good; but we Thais know that it is the heart that is the seat of life, and the boy's heart is still beating.' Which was *almost* true—there

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was a machine that was beating in place of his heart. The Death Lord, who has a macabre sense of humor, began laughing uproariously; then he said to me, 'Your compassion for this child is commendable, and goes a long way toward mitigating the evil for which you were cast into the underworld. I can't send him back, but maybe I could commute your sentence. If, as you say, the *farang* soul is dead but the Thai is not, I suppose I could simply send a Thai *vinyaan* to occupy the child's body, and no one will be the wiser. For I am a servant of the teaching of the Lord Buddha, and it is my duty to reward compassion by hastening your soul in its trillion-year journey towards enlightenment.' Then Lord Yama waved his hands, and—poof!—I was reborn."

"That is the weirdest thing I have ever heard," I said.

"It is all part of the great chain of being," my great-great-aunt said, shrugging. "Take it or leave it."

"But the lottery tickets—"

"It's out of my hands."

"But you *know* the winning number! You as much as said so! Wait . . . does that mean Joey knows?"

"Hard to say. The conscious mind has little knowledge of past lives." Her voice was getting fainter. To my dismay, we were plummeting back to the earth. I could see the whole of the city whirling beneath me . . . the great palace of the Chakri Kings, the glittering shopping malls and freeways, the great river choked with houseboats in the shadow of the Temple of Dawn. . . .

"Joey . . . " Desperation flooded me. I had failed! How could I face my parents, knowing they would have to give up their apartment? "Joey!" I was shaking him now, gripping his shoulders as he convulsed under the spell of possession. . . .

I was still shaking him as the dream faded away.

The canal was still swollen from the torrent, but the rain had ended as abruptly as it had started; that is how the monsoon rains are. I came to, still shaking Joey, who was rubbing his eyes. "Did I miss something?" he said. It was still dark . . . not even midnight yet.

"We can go home now," I said. "It's useless. You're my great-great-aunt, and we're not going to win the lottery anyway."

"Why not?" Joey said. "HK 2516635—that's the winning serial number, isn't it? I assume you got it too."

I gaped at him.

"It's early yet," he said. "Maybe we can catch the late showing of *Aliens* before we go home." He looked at me. "How'd you manage to stay so dry, little brother?"

HK 2516635. By an amazing stroke of karma, we found that lottery

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ticket the next morning at the stationery store at the head of the *soi*. Joey and I bought the whole ticket and split it in half.

A day later, a group of us gathered to watch the drawing on television. We were at the Friedbergs' house: my grandmother, my parents, my little sister, and some raucous friends of the Friedbergs from the American embassy. We sat around the television set while Aunt Joom served us elegant hors d'oeuvres and Coke. A revolution was going on that day; the embassy people were sitting around pontificating about it, quite oblivious to the antics of the announcer. They were playing a music video in between each drawing, and the suspense was mounting . . . mounting . . . mounting. . . .

The Friedbergs' friends droned on: "Who's going to get into power this time?" . . . "I got interviewed by CNN this afternoon." . . . "That new field marshal, what's his name, really seems to have the support of the CIA. . . . "

"Shut up, you guys!" Joey said. "Anyone who's lived here can tell you that this revolution's gonna fizzle out before dawn."

"Yeah, revolutions only work in October," I said. After all, I distinctly remembered the last five. "Coups in other months are always abortive."

"Army's got to have something to do," my father said, guzzling a Singha beer.

"How anyone can be interested in such things is beyond me," my mother said, as she vigorously pounded shrimp paste in a mortar and pestle, stinking up the entire living room. "What possible difference can it make when Their Divine Majesties are the true heart of the Siamese people?" Meanwhile, my grandmother, serenely confident of victory, was ignoring the entire thing, merely humming away to herself, one of those peasant melodies.

Everyone started arguing, and it was a moment before Aunt Joom noticed our winning number pop up on the screen. "Merciful Buddha!" she shrieked. "Be quiet everyone! Look! It's come! It's the number!"

"We're rich," my father said softly.

I didn't even mind that it was really Joey who had come up with the winning number. We were going to have our new condominium after all—my father was going to get a new car—everything was going to be all right after all!

At that moment, the army took over the television station and announced that there would be a few changes.

We watched in horror as a general in a shiny uniform came on the air and informed us that, because of tampering by certain high officials, it had become necessary to declare the lottery void. The abovementioned high officials would all be resigning in the morning, and his humble self the general had been asked to form a new government to preside over

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the aftermath of the scandal. He apologized for the revolution, but things would be back to normal in the morning.

"I know that general!" I said. "That's Khun Phairoj . . . the man whose sister-in-law I . . . "

My father shook his head. "It's not even October."

"Does that mean we're not going to be rich?" said my little sister Kaew.

"On the contrary," said Mrs. Friedberg. "I may as well tell you now. I've obtained a big grant from the Ford Foundation to study your grandmother's peasant songs. It's not much by Ford Foundation standards, but your share of it could come to . . . say, a million baht." General excitement all around.

"Besides, honored father," I said, "I rescued the prime minister's sister-in-law from wandering the earth as a *phii krasue.* Surely you can get a promotion out of that."

I heard Joey calling from the balcony. "Awesome, Samraan! There are tanks rolling up the main road."

"Here we go again," my father said.

I went to join my friend. Two tanks were processing up the street on their way to seize the government. It was another humdrum evening in the Divine Metropolis. The street was crowded with food-vendors, shoppers, laughing students; no one but Joey seemed to notice the revolution. The monsoon rain was about to come again. The air was heavy with moisture and gasoline fumes and the fragrance of ripening bananas.

Joey watched the tanks starry-eyed, transfixed. It's a quality I had grudgingly come to admire in the Americans: their ability to feel as though everything around them, no matter how many times the world has seen it, is happening for the first time. They have a spanking-newness about them, a sense of wonder. Perhaps it is simply that in their country they rarely have revolutions, exorcisms, or lotteries. I don't know.

I did know, however, that the spirit of my great-great-aunt had come to rest in the body of my friend. That she had shown that I was still her favorite descendant by arranging for the money we had prayed for to come to us—in spite of the lottery being rigged. The heart of the Lord of Death had been moved, the Ford Foundation mobilized, continents and oceans traversed, all this so that my family's karma could be fulfilled.

So awed was I by the cosmic grandeur of our personal lives, and so overcome with gratitude, that I fell on my knees in front of my great-great-aunt's latest incarnation and placed my folded palms between Joey Friedberg's feet. Thank you for protecting me, honored great-great-aunt, I thought, thank you in the name of the Lord Buddha.

"Why the fuck are you doing *that?*" Joey said, bemused and confused.

"You really don't know, do you?" I studied his face for any trace of remembrance of that night's vision. There was nothing, as is proper . . . the

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conscious mind cannot suffer the burden of so many past lives, or it would go mad.

"Well, at least my little brother's treating me with proper respect at last."

"He sure is." For once I didn't mind being called the little brother of a *farang*. "He sure is." ●

NEXT ISSUE

It's the twenty-second century and time to Party next month, as **Walter Jon Williams** returns with our kaleidoscopic May cover story, "Elegy For Angels and Dogs." His Serene Highness Lamoral von Thurn und Taxis is a member of the ultra-exclusive Party Set, an organization of fabulously rich, fabulously decadent quasi-immortals who have found a way to spread their lifetimes out throughout the centuries by a clever use of Cold Sleep—wakening from hibernation for a day or two every few years (or decades) to attend lavish Parties that span the solar system from the icy orbit of Uranus to the ancient Day of the Dead celebration in old Mexico. But even the most infinite wealth can't always insulate you from the Winds of Change, and change is in the air, and Murder is afoot, as Lamoral must attempt to unravel a deadly mystery, one that may force even the Party Set to change their ways if they wish to survive.... A semi-sequel to Roger Zelazny's famous story "The Graveyard Heart," this big, robust novella is sure to be one of the major stories of the year. From the cruel and decadent future we then turn to the equally cruel and decadent past, as Nebula-winner **Pat Murphy** returns with yet another big novella, the magical, mysterious, and lyrical story of a compassionate Irish giant pitted against the blank grinding indifference of eighteenth-century London, in the evocative fantasy "Bones." Each of these huge novellas is close to novel-length, and together they strain the seams of our jampacked May issue—don't miss them!

ALSO IN MAY: **Bruce McAllister** unveils the compelling story of a rich woman who tried to create Heaven On Earth—or one of its inhabitants, at any rate—in the powerful and unsettling "Angels"; **Isaac Asimov** treats us to a wry little story about a writer who increases his efficiency by joining the Computer Age, and who gets far more help than he bargained for, in "Fault-Intolerent"; **F.M. Busby** returns after a long absence with a taut and exciting story of a man who employs a very odd weapon in a life-and-death struggle against a hideous monster, in the ingenious "Where Are You, Guy de Maupassant, Now That We Need You?"; and **John Maddox Roberts** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a time-crossed study of the Eternal City, Rome, and proves that some things are all too eternal, in "Mighty Fortresses." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our May issue on sale on your newsstands on April 3, 1990.

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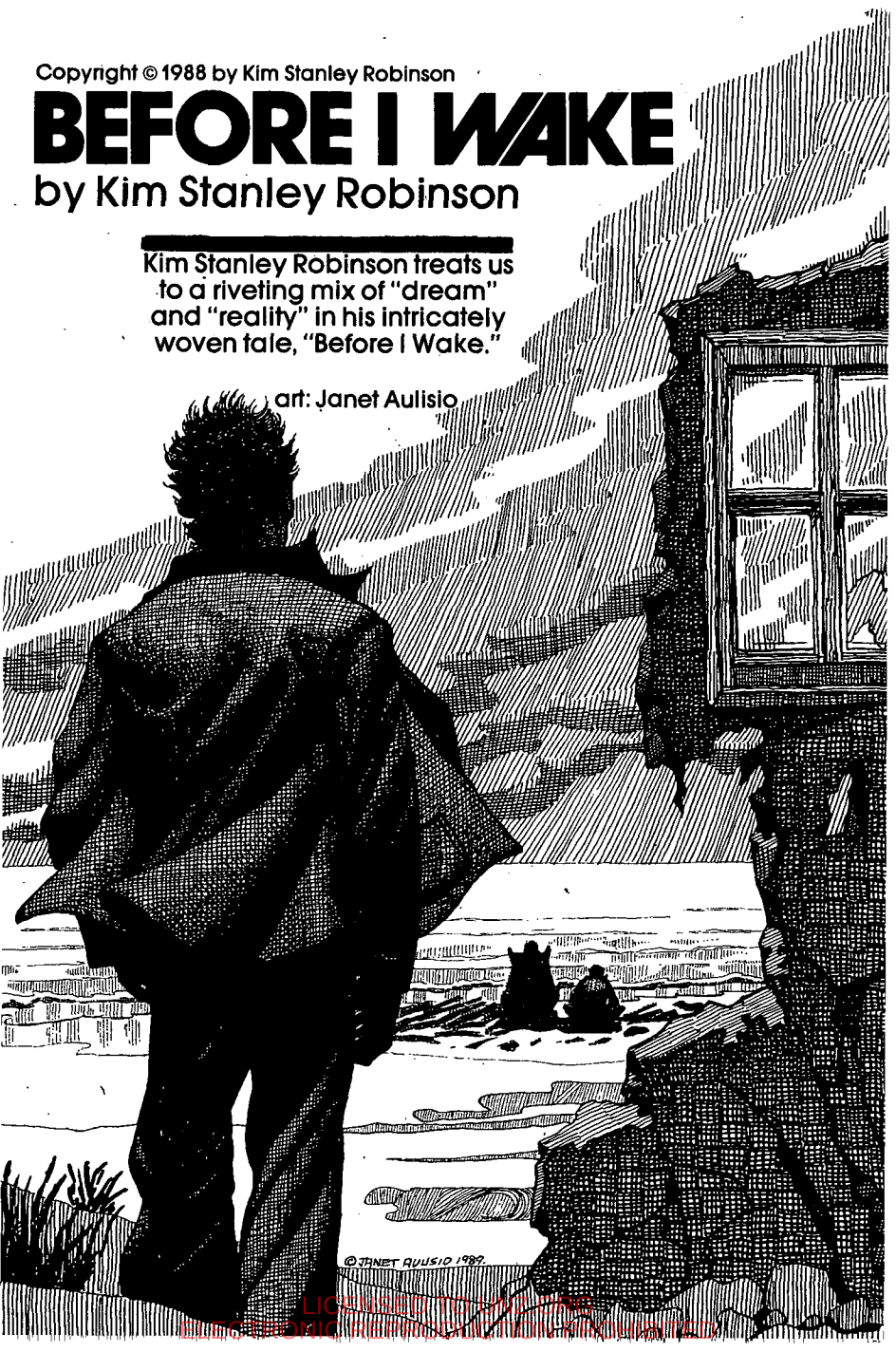
BEFORE I WAKE

by Kim Stanley Robinson

Kim Stanley Robinson treats us to a riveting mix of "dream" and "reality" in his intricately woven tale, "Before I Wake."

art: Janet Aulisio



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In his dream Abernathy stood on a steep rock ridge. A talus slope dropped from the ridge to a glacial basin containing a small lake. The lake was cobalt in the middle, aquamarine around the edges. Here and there in the rock expanse patches of meadow grass gleamed, like the lawns of marmot estates. There were no trees. The cold air felt thin in his throat. He could see ranges many miles away, and though everything was perfectly still there was also an immense sweep in things, as if a gust of wind had caught the very fabric of being.

"Wake up, damn you," a voice said. He was shoved in the back, and he tumbled down the rockfall, starting a small avalanche.

Now he stood in a large white room. Glass boxes of various sizes were stacked everywhere, four and five to a pile, and in every box was a sleeping animal: monkey, rat, dog, cat, pig, dolphin, turtle. "No," he said, backing up. "Please, no."

A bearded man entered the room. "Come on, wake up," he said brusquely. "Time to get back to it, Fred. Our only hope is to work as hard as we can. You have to resist when you start slipping away!" He seized Abernathy by the arms and sat him down on a box of squirrels. "Now listen!" he cried. "We're asleep! We're dreaming!"

"Thank God," Abernathy said.

"Not so fast! We're awake as well."

"I don't believe you."

"Yes you do! Here, look at this." He took a large roll of graph paper and slapped Abernathy in the chest with it, then unrolled it over the floor. It was covered with black squiggles.

"It looks like a musical score," Abnerathy said absently.

The bearded man shouted "Yes! Yes! This is the score for the symphony our brains play every day! Very apt! Now here's the old score, see the violins yammering away for sixteen hours? That's what used to be ours, Fred; that was consciousness." He yanked hard on his beard with both hands, looking anguished. "Then there was a sudden drop to the basses, bowing and bowing and bowing, like there. Blessed sleep. And during the night we heard from the mid-range instruments, horn and oboe and viola, spinning over the ground bass with their little improvisations,which got longer and longer until one filled the hour before the violins started blasting again, yes, Fred, it's perfectly apt!"

"Thank you," Abernathy said. "But you don't have to yell. I'm right here."

"Then *wake up*," the man said in a furious low voice. "You can't, can you! Playing the new song like all the rest of us. Look at it there—eighty percent REM sleep, mixed indiscriminately with consciousness and deep sleep, turning us all into dreamwalkers, into waking nightmares."

In the depths of his beard, Abernathy saw, all the man's teeth were

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incisors. Abernathy edged toward the door, then broke for it and ran. The man leaped forward and tackled him, and they tumbled to the floor.

Abernathy woke up.

"Ah ha," the man said. It was Winston, administrator of the lab. "So now you believe me," he said sourly, rubbing an elbow. "I suppose we should write that down on the walls. How to wake up from the midst of dream. If we all start slipping away like you, we won't even remember what life used to be. It'll all be over then."

"Where are we?" Abernathy asked.

"In the lab," Winston replied, voice filled with heavy patience. "We live here now, remember, Fred? Remember?"

Abernathy looked around. The lab was large and well-lit. Graph paper recording EEGs was scattered over the floor. Black countertops protruded from the walls, which were cluttered with machinery. In one corner were two rats in a cage.

Abernathy shook his head violently. It was all coming back. He was awake now, but the dream had been true. He groaned, walked to the room's little window, saw the smoke rising from the city below. "Where's Jill?"

Winston shrugged. They hurried through a door at the end of the lab, into a small room containing cots and blankets. No one there.

"She's probably gone back to the house again," Abernathy said.

Winston hissed with irritation and worry. "I'll check the grounds," he said. "You'd better go to the house. Be careful!"

Fred was already out the door.

In many places the streets were almost blocked by smashed cars, but little had changed since Abernathy's last venture home, and he made good time. The suburbs were choking in haze that smelled like incinerator smoke. A gas station attendant holding a pump handle stared in astonishment as he drove by, then waved. Abernathy didn't wave back. On one of these expeditions he had seen a knifing, and now he didn't like to look.

He stopped the car at the curb before his house. The remains of his house. It was charred almost to the ground. The blackened chimney was all that stood over chest high.

He got out of his old Cortina and slowly crossed the lawn, which was marked by black footprints. In the distance a dog barked insistently.

Jill stood in the kitchen, humming to herself and moving black things from here to there. She looked up as Abernathy stopped in the side yard before her. Her eyes twitched from side to side. "You're home," she said cheerily. "How was your day?"

"Jill, let's go out to dinner," Abernathy said.

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"But I'm already cooking!"

"I can see that." He stepped over what had been the kitchen wall and took her arm. "Don't worry about that. Let's go anyway."

"My my," Jill said, brushing his face with a sooty hand. "Aren't you romantic this evening."

He stretched his lips wide. "You bet. Come on." He pulled her carefully out of the house and across the yard, and helped her into the Cortina. "Such chivalry," she remarked, eyes darting about in tandem.

Abernathy got in and started the engine. "But Fred," his wife said, "what about Jeff and Fran?"

Abernathy looked out his window. "They've got a babysitter," he finally said.

Jill frowned, nodded, sat back in her seat. Her broad face was smudged. "Ah," she said, "I do so like to dine out."

"Yes," Abernathy said, and yawned. He felt drowsy. "Oh no," he said. "No!" He bit his lip, pinched the back of the hand on the wheel. Yawned again. "No!" he cried. Jill jerked against her door in surprise. He swerved to avoid hitting an Oriental woman sitting in the middle of the road. "I must get to the lab," he shouted. He pulled down the Cortina's sun visor, took one of the pens from his coat pocket and awkwardly scrawled *To The Lab* on it. Jill was staring at him. "It wasn't my fault," she whispered.

He drove them onto the freeway. All thirty lanes were clear, and he put his foot down on the accelerator. "To the lab," he sang, "to the lab, to the lab." A flying police vehicle landed on the highway ahead of them, folded its wings and sped off. Abernathy tried to follow it, but the freeway turned and narrowed, they were back on street level. He shouted with frustration, bit the flesh at the base of his thumb. Jill leaned back against her door, crying. Her eyes looked like small beings, a team trying to jerk its way free. "I couldn't help it," she said. "He loved me, you know. And I loved him."

Abernathy drove on. Some streets were burning. He wanted to go west, needed to go west. The car was behaving oddly. They were on a tree-lined avenue, out where there were few houses. A giant Boeing 747 lay across the road, its wings slewed forward. A high tunnel had been cut through it so traffic could pass. A cop with whistle and white gloves waved them through.

On the dashboard an emergency light blinked *To The Lab*. Abernathy sobbed convulsively. "I don't know how!"

Jill, his sister, sat up straight. "Turn left," she said quietly. Abernathy threw the directional switch and their car re-routed itself onto the track that veered left. They came to other splits in the track, and each time Jill told him which way to go. The rear view mirror bloomed with smoke.

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* * *

Then he woke up. Winston was swabbing his arm with a wad of cotton, wiping off a droplet of blood.

"Amphetamines and pain," Winston whispered.

They were in the lab. About a dozen lab techs, post docs, and grad students were in there at their countertops, working with great speed.

"How's Jill?" Abernathy said.

"Fine, fine. She's sleeping right now. Listen, Fred, I've found a way to keep us awake for longer periods of time. Amphetamines and pain. Regular injections of benzedrine, plus a sharp burst of pain every hour or so, administered in whatever way you find most convenient. Metabolism stays too high for the mind to slip into the dreamwalking. I tried it and stayed fully awake and alert for six hours. Now we're all using the method."

Abernathy watched his lab techs dash about. "I can tell." He could feel his heart's rapid emphatic thumping.

"Well, let's get to it," Winston said intently. "Let's make use of this time."

Abernathy stood. Winston called a little meeting. Feeling the gazes fixed on him, Abernathy collected his thoughts. "The mind is an electrochemical action. Since we're all suffering the effects of this, it seems to me we can ignore the chemical and concentrate on the electrical. If the ambient fields have changed . . . anyone know how many gauss the magnetic field is now? Or what the cosmic ray count is?"

They stared at him.

"We can tune into the space station's monitors," he said. "And do the rest here."

So he worked, and they worked with him. Every hour a grinning Winston came around with hypodermics in hand, singing "Speed, speed, spee-ud!" He convinced Abernathy to let droplets of hydrochloric acid fall on the inside of his forearm.

It kept Abernathy awake better than it did the others. For a whole day, then two, he worked without pause, eating crackers and drinking water as he worked, giving himself the injections when Winston wasn't there.

After the first few hours his assistants began slipping back into dreamwalking, despite the injections and acid splashings. Assignments he gave were never completed, or botched. One of his techs presented him with a successful experiment: the two rats, grafted together at the leg. Vainly Abernathy tried to pummel the man back to wakefulness.

In the end he did all the work himself. It took days. As his techs collapsed or wandered off he shifted from counter to counter, squinting sand-filled eyes to read oscilloscope and computer screen. He had never

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felt so exhausted in his life. It was like taking tests in a subject he didn't understand, in which he was severely retarded.

Still he kept working. The EEGs showed oscillation between wakefulness and REM sleep, in a pattern he had never seen. And there were correlations between the EEGs and fluctuations in the magnetic field. Some of the men's flickering eyes were open, and they sat on the floors talking to each other or to him, but they appeared too exhausted to move. Once he had to calm Winston, who was on the floor weeping and saying "We'll never stop dreaming, Fred, we'll never stop." Abernathy gave him an injection, but it didn't have any effect.

He kept working. He sat at a crowded table at his high school reunion, and found he could work anyway. He gave himself an injection whenever he remembered. He felt very, very tired.

Eventually he felt he understood as much as he was going to. Everyone else was lying in the cot room with Jill, or were slumped on the floors. Eyes and eyelids were twitching.

"The earth, the sun, the solar system—we all move through space filled with dust and gas and fields of force. Now there's much more than there used to be. The read-outs from the space station show that, show signs of a strong electro-magnetic field we've apparently moved into. Perhaps it's the shockwave of a supernova, something nearby that we're just seeing now. Anyone looked up into the sky lately? Anyway. Something. And this field has thrown the electrical patterns of our brains into something like what we called the REM state. Our brains rebel and struggle towards consciousness as much as they can, but this field forces them back. So we oscillate." He laughed weakly, and crawled up onto one of the countertops to get some sleep.

He woke and brushed the dust off his lab coat, which had served him as a blanket. The dirt road he had been sleeping on was empty. He walked. It was cloudy, and nearly dark.

He passed a small group of shacks, built in a tropical style with open walls and palm thatch roofs. They were empty.

Then he was at the sea's edge. Before him extended a low promontory, composed of thousands of wooden chairs, all crushed and piled together. Out near the tide line there was a human figure, seated in a big chair that still had seat and back and one arm.

Abernathy stepped out carefully, onto slats and lathed cylinders of wood, from a chair arm to the plywood bottom of a chair seat. Around him the grey ocean was strangely calm; glassy swells rose and fell over the slick wood at waterline without a sound. Insubstantial clouds of fog, the lowest parts of a solid cloud cover, floated slowly onshore. The air

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was salty and wet. Abernathy shivered, stepped down to the next fragment of weathered grey wood.

The seated man turned to look at him. It was Winston. "Fred," he called, loud in the silence of the dawn. Abernathy picked up a chair back, placed it carefully, sat.

"How are you?" Winston said.

Abernathy nodded. "Okay." Down close to the water he could hear the small slaps and suckings of the sea's rise and fall. The swells looked a bit larger, and he could see thin smoky mist rising from them as they approached the shore.

"Winston," he croaked, and cleared his throat. "What's happened?"

"We're dreaming."

"But what does that mean?"

Winston laughed wildly. "Emergent stage one sleep, transitional sleep, rapid sleep, rhombencephalic sleep, pontine sleep, activated sleep, paradoxical sleep." He grinned ironically. "No one knows what it is."

"But all those studies."

"Yes, all those studies. And how I used to believe in them, how I used to work for them, all those sorry guesses ranging from the ridiculous to the absurd, we dream to organize experience into memory, to stimulate the senses in the dark, to peer into the future, to give our depth perception exercise for God's sake! I mean we don't know, do we Fred. We don't know what dreaming is, we don't know what sleep is, you only have to think about it a bit to realize we didn't know what consciousness itself was, what it meant to be awake. Did we ever really know? We lived, we slept, we dreamed, and all three equal mysteries. Now that we're doing all three at once, is the mystery any deeper?"

Abernathy picked at the grain in the wood of a chair leg. "A lot of the time I feel normal," he said. "It's just that strange things keep happening."

"Your EEGs display an unusual pattern," Winston said, mimicking a scientific tone. "More alpha and beta waves than the rest of us. As if you're struggling harder to wake up."

"Yes. That's what it feels like."

They sat in silence for a time, watching swells lap at the wet chairs. The tide was falling. Offshore, near the limit of visibility, Abernathy saw a large cabin cruiser drifting in the current.

"So tell me what you've found," Winston said.

Abernathy described the data transmitted from the space station, then his own experiments.

Winston nodded. "So we're stuck here for good."

"Unless we pass through this field. Or—I've gotten an idea for a device you could wear around your head, that might restore the old field."

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"A solution seen in a dream?"

"Yes."

Winston laughed. "How I used to believe in all our rationality, Fred. Dreams as some sort of electro-chemical manifestation of the nervous system, random activity, how reasonable it all sounded! Give the depth perception exercise! God, how small-minded it all was. Why shouldn't we have believed that dreams were great travels, to the future, to other universes, to a world more real than our own! They felt that way sometimes, in that last second before waking, as if we lived in a world so charged with meaning that it might burst with it. . . . And now here we are. We're here, Fred, this is the moment and our only moment, no matter how we name it. *We're here.* From idea to symbol, perhaps. People will adapt. That's one of our talents."

"I don't like it," Abernathy said. "I never liked my dreams."

Winston merely laughed at him. "They say consciousness itself was a leap like this one, people were ambling around like dogs and then one day, maybe because the earth moved through the shockwave of some distant explosion, sure, one day one of them straightened up and looked around surprised, and said '*I am.*' "

"That would be a surprise," Abernathy said.

"And this time everyone woke up one morning still dreaming, and looked around and said '*WHAT AM I?*' " Winston laughed. "Yes, we're stuck here. But I can adapt." He pointed. "Look, that boat out there is sinking."

They watched several people aboard the craft struggle to get a rubber raft over the side. After many dunkings they got it in the water and everyone inside it. Then they rowed away, offshore into the mist.

"I'm afraid," Abernathy said.

Then he woke up. He was back in the lab. It was in worse shape than ever. A couple of countertops had been swept clean to make room for chessboards, and several techs were playing blindfolded, arguing over which board was which.

He went to Winston's offices to get more benzedrine. There was no more. He grabbed one of his post-docs and said "How long have I been asleep?" The man's eyes twitched, and he sang his reply: "Sixteen men on a dead man's chest, yo ho ho and a bottle of rum." Abernathy went to the cot room. Jill was there, naked except for light blue underwear, smoking a cigarette. One of the grad students was brushing her nipples with a feather. "Oh hi, Fred," she said, looking him straight in the eye. "Where have you been?"

"Talking to Winston," he said with difficulty. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes! I don't know when, though. . . ."

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He started to work alone again. No one wanted to help. He cleared a small room off the main lab, and dragged in the equipment he needed. He locked three large boxes of crackers in a cabinet, and tried to lock himself in his room whenever he felt drowsy. Once he spent six weeks in China, then he woke up. Sometimes he woke out in his old Cortina, hugging the steering wheel like his only friend. All his friends were lost. Each time he went back and started working again. He could stay awake for hours at a time. He got lots done. The magnets were working well, he was getting the fields he wanted. The device for placing the field around the head—an odd-looking wire helmet—was practicable.

He was tired. It hurt to blink. Every time he felt drowsy he applied more acid to his arm. it was covered with burns, but none of them hurt very much anymore. When he woke he felt as if he hadn't slept for days. Twice his grad students helped out, and he was grateful for that. Winston came by occasionally, but only laughed at him. He was too tired, everything he did was clumsy. He got on the lab phone once and tried to call his parents; all the lines were busy. The radio was filled with static, except for a station that played nothing but episodes of "The Lone Ranger." He went back to work. He ate crackers and worked. He worked and worked.

Late one afternoon he went out onto the lab's cafeteria terrace to take a break. The sun was low, and a chill breeze blew. He could see the air, filled with amber light, and he breathed it in violently. Below him the city smoked, and the wind blew, and he knew that he was alive, that he was aware he was alive, and that something important was pushing into things, suffusing every particle. . . .

Jill walked onto the terrace, still wearing nothing but the blue underwear. She stepped on the balls of her feet, smiled oddly. Abernathy could see goose-pimples sweep across her skin like cat's paws over water, and the power of her presence—distant, female, mysterious—filled him with fear.

They stood several feet apart and looked down at the city, where their house had been. The area was burning.

Jill gestured at it. "It's too bad we only had the courage to live our lives fully in dreams."

"I thought we were doing okay," Abernathy said. "I thought we engaged it the best we could, every waking moment."

She stared at him, again with the knowing smile. "You did think that, didn't you."

"Yes," he said fiercely, "I did. I did."

He went inside to work it off.

Then he woke up. He was in the mountains, in the high cirque again.

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He was higher now and could see two more lakes, tiny granite pools, above the cobalt-and-aquamarine one. He was climbing shattered granite, getting near the pass. There was lichen on the rocks. The wind dried the sweat on his face, cooled him. It was quiet and still, so still, so quiet . . .

"Wake up!"

It was Winston. Abernathy was in his little room (high ranges in the distance, the dusty green of forests below), wedged in a corner. He got up, went to the crackers cabinet, pumped himself full of the benzedrine he had found in some syringes on the floor. (Snow and lichen.)

He went into the main lab and broke the fire alarm. That got everyone's attention. It took him a couple of minutes to stop the alarm. When he did his ears were ringing.

"The device is ready to try," he said to the group. There were about twenty of them. Some were as neat as if they were off to church, others were tattered and dirty. Jill stood to one side.

Winston crashed to the front of the group. "What's ready?" he shouted.

"The device to stop us dreaming," Abernathy said weakly. "It's ready to try."

Winston said slowly, "Well, let's try it then, okay, Fred?"

Abernathy carried helmets and equipment out of his room and into the lab. He arranged the transmitters and powered the magnets and the field generators. When it was all ready he stood up and wiped his brow.

"Is this it?" Winston asked. Abernathy nodded. Winston picked up one of the wire helmets.

"Well I don't like it!" he said, and struck the helmet against the wall.

Abernathy's mouth dropped open. One of the techs gave a shove to his electro-magnets, and in a sudden fury Abernathy picked up a bat of wood and hit the man. Some of his assistants leaped to his aid, the rest pressed in and pulled at his equipment, tearing it down. A tremendous fight erupted. Abernathy swung his slab of wood with abandon, feeling great satisfaction each time it struck. There was blood in the air. His machines were being destroyed. Jill picked up one of the helmets and threw it at him, screaming, *"It's your fault, it's your fault!"* He knocked down a man near his magnets and had swung the wood back to kill him when suddenly he saw a bright glint in Winston's hand; it was a surgical knife. With a swing like a sidearm pitcher's Winston slammed the knife into Abernathy's diaphragm, burying it. Abernathy staggered back, tried to draw in a breath and found that he could, he was all right, he hadn't been stabbed. He turned and ran.

He ran onto the terrace, closely pursued by Winston and Jill and the others, who tripped and fell even as he did. The patio was much higher than it used to be, far above the city, which burned and smoked. There

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was a long wide stairway descending into the heart of the city. Abernathy could hear screams, it was night and windy, he couldn't see any stars, he was at the edge of the terrace, he turned and the group was right behind him, faces twisted with fury, "No!" he cried, and then they rushed him, and he swung the wood slab and swung it and swung it, and turned to run down the stairs and then without knowing how he had done it he tripped and fell head over heels down the rocky staircase, falling falling falling.

Then he woke up. He was falling. ●

VAMPIRE VILLANELLE

If I could tell you, I would let you know
Not to rage against the dying of the light.
I sleep to wake, but take my waking slow,

Clinging to the soil in which I cannot grow.
Wise men at their end know dark is right:
If I could tell you, I would let you know.

We are the dancers in the afterglow:
Sired in caskets, born to live at night,
We sleep to wake, but take our waking slow.

You whose infant passion has yet to grow,
Whose blood-teeth have not yet learned to bite,
If I could tell you, I would let you know

The knack is this: to fasten and not let go,
To taste the iron-rich blood by candlelight,
Then sleep to wake but take your waking slow.

Images in mirrors will never show
How ageless is the dark's own face of fright:
If I could tell you, I would let you know.
I sleep to wake, but take my waking slow.

—David Lunde, *et al.*

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While we've published a number of Joe Haldeman's excellent poems, it is an honor to have the opportunity, at last, to run one of this Hugo- and Nebula- award winning author's magnificent prose stories. Mr. Haldeman teaches at MIT in Massachusetts, and is a member of the Hemingway Society. He tells us that while he considers himself an amateur student of Hemingway, he is grateful to several scholars who helped him with this story. Mr. Haldeman's next novel is also entitled *The Hemingway Hoax*. It will be out soon from William Morrow.

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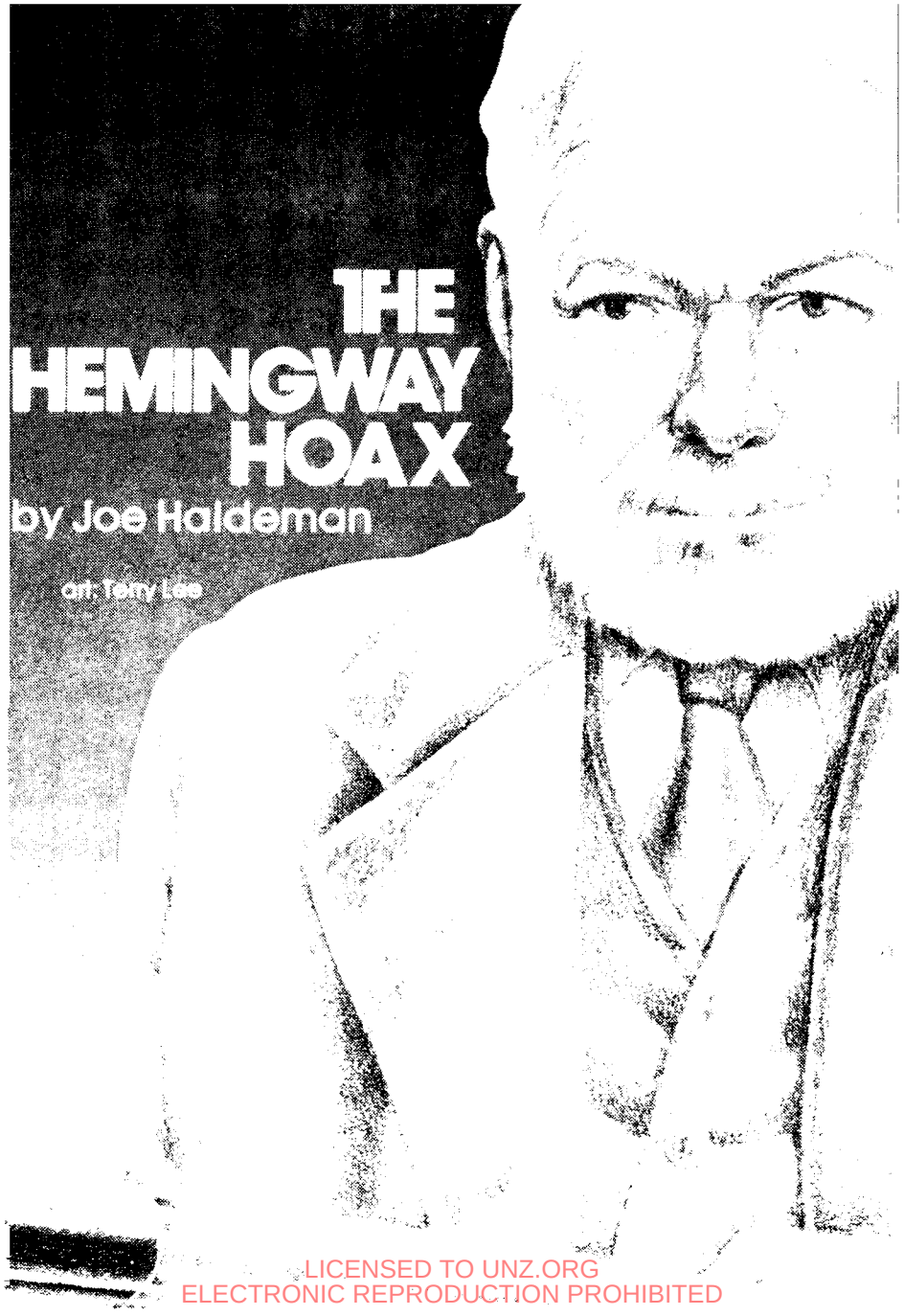
THE HEMINGWAY HOAX

by Joe Haldeman

art: Terry Lee



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1. The Torrents of Spring

Our story begins in a rundown bar in Key West, not so many years from now. The bar is not the one Hemingway drank at, nor yet the one that claims to be the one he drank at, because they are both too expensive and full of tourists. This bar, in a more interesting part of town, is a Cuban place. It is neither clean nor well-lighted, but has cold beer and good strong Cuban coffee. Its cheap prices and rascally charm are what bring together the scholar and the rogue.

Their first meeting would be of little significance to either at the time, though the scholar, John Baird, would never forget it. John Baird was not capable of forgetting anything.

Key West is lousy with writers, mostly poor writers, in one sense of that word or the other. Poor people did not interest our rogue, Sylvester Castlemaine, so at first he didn't take any special note of the man sitting in the corner scribbling on a yellow pad. Just another would-be writer, come down to see whether some of Papa's magic would rub off. Not worth the energy of a con.

But Castle's professional powers of observation caught at a detail or two and focused his attention. The man was wearing jeans and a faded flannel shirt, but his shoes were expensive Italian loafers. His beard had been trimmed by a barber. He was drinking Heineken. The pen he was scribbling with was a fat Mont Blanc Diplomat, two hundred bucks on the hoof, discounted. Castle got his cup of coffee and sat at a table two away from the writer.

He waited until the man paused, set the pen down, took a drink. "Writing a story?" Castle said.

The man blinked at him. "No . . . just an article." He put the cap on the pen with a crisp snap. "An article about stories. I'm a college professor."

"Publish or perish," Castle said.

The man relaxed a bit. "Too true." He riffled through the yellow pad. "This won't help much. It's not going anywhere."

"Tell you what . . . bet you a beer it's Hemingway or Tennessee Williams."

"Too easy." He signaled the bartender. "Dos cervezas. Hemingway, the early stories. You know his work?"

"Just a little. We had to read him in school—*The Old Man and the Fish?* And then I read a couple after I got down here." He moved over to the man's table. "Name's Castle."

"John Baird." Open, honest expression; not too promising. You can't con somebody unless he thinks he's conning you. "Teach up at Boston."

"I'm mostly fishing. Shrimp nowadays." Of course Castle didn't normally fish, not for things in the sea, but the shrimp part was true. He'd been reduced to heading shrimp on the Catalina for five dollars a bucket. "So what about these early stories?"

The bartender set down the two beers and gave Castle a weary look.

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"Well . . . they don't exist." John Baird carefully poured the beer down the side of his glass. "They were stolen. Never published."

"So what can you write about them?"

"Indeed. That's what I've been asking myself." He took a sip of the beer and settled back. "Seventy-four years ago they were stolen. December 1922. That's really what got me working on them; thought I would do a paper, a monograph, for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the occasion."

It sounded less and less promising, but this was the first imported beer Castle had had in months. He slowly savored the bite of it.

"He and his first wife, Hadley, were living in Paris. You know about Hemingway's early life?"

"Huh uh. Paris?"

"He grew up in Oak Park, Illinois. That was kind of a prissy, self-satisfied suburb of Chicago."

"Yeah, I been there."

"He didn't like it. In his teens he sort of ran away from home, went down to Kansas City to work on a newspaper.

"World War I started, and like a lot of kids, Hemingway couldn't get into the army because of bad eyesight, so he joined the Red Cross and went off to drive ambulances in Italy. Take cigarettes and chocolate to the troops.

"That almost killed him. He was just doing his cigarettes-and-chocolate routine and an artillery round came in, killed the guy next to him, tore up another, riddled Hemingway with shrapnel. He claims then that he picked up the wounded guy and carried him back to the trench, in spite of being hit in the knee by a machine-gun bullet."

"What do you mean, 'claims'?"

"You're too young to have been in Vietnam."

"Yeah."

"Good for you. I was hit in the knee by a machine-gun bullet myself, and went down on my ass and didn't get up for five weeks. He didn't carry anybody one step."

"That's interesting."

"Well, he was always rewriting his life. We all do it. But it seemed to be a compulsion with him. That's one thing that makes Hemingway scholarship challenging."

Baird poured the rest of the beer into his glass. "Anyhow, he actually was the first American wounded in Italy, and they made a big deal over him. He went back to Oak Park a war hero. He had a certain amount of success with women."

"Or so he says?"

"Right, God knows. Anyhow, he met Hadley Richardson, an older woman but quite a number, and they had a steamy courtship and got married and said the hell with it, moved to Paris to live a sort of Bohemian life while Hemingway worked on perfecting his art. That part isn't

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bullshit. He worked diligently and he did become one of the best writers of his era. Which brings us to the lost manuscripts."

"Do tell."

"Hemingway was picking up a little extra money doing journalism. He'd gone to Switzerland to cover a peace conference for a news service. When it was over, he wired Hadley to come join him for some skiing.

"This is where it gets odd. On her own initiative, Hadley packed up all of Ernest's work. All of it. Not just the typescripts, but the handwritten first drafts and the carbons."

"That's like a Xerox?"

"Right. She packed them in an overnight bag, then packed her own suitcase. A porter at the train station, the Gare de Lyon, put them aboard for her. She left the train for a minute to find something to read—and when she came back, they were gone."

"Suitcase and all?"

"No, just the manuscripts. She and the porter searched up and down the train. But that was it. Somebody had seen the overnight bag sitting there and snatched it. Lost forever."

That did hold a glimmer of professional interest. "That's funny. You'd think they'd get a note then, like 'If you ever want to see your stories again, bring a million bucks to the Eiffel Tower' sort of thing."

"A few years later, that might have happened. It didn't take long for Hemingway to become famous. But at the time, only a few of the literary intelligentsia knew about him."

Castle shook his head in commiseration with the long-dead thief. "Guy who stole 'em probably didn't even read English. Dumped 'em in the river."

John Baird shivered visibly. "Undoubtedly. But people have never stopped looking for them. Maybe they'll show up in some attic someday."

"Could happen." Wheels turning.

"It's happened before in literature. Some of Boswell's diaries were recovered because a scholar recognized his handwriting on an old piece of paper a merchant used to wrap a fish. Hemingway's own last book, he put together from notes that had been lost for thirty years. They were in a couple of trunks in the basement of the Ritz, in Paris." He leaned forward, excited. "Then after he died, they found another batch of papers down here, in a back room in Sloppy Joe's. It could still happen."

Castle took a deep breath. "It could be made to happen, too."

"Made to happen?"

"Just speakin', you know, in theory. Like some guy who really knows Hemingway, suppose he makes up some stories that're like those old ones, finds some seventy-five-year-old paper and an old, what do you call them, not a word processor—"

"Typewriter."

"Whatever. Think he could pass 'em off for the real thing?"

"I don't know if he could fool me," Baird said, and tapped the side of his head. "I have a freak memory: eidetic, photographic. I have just about

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every word Hemingway ever wrote committed to memory." He looked slightly embarrassed. "Of course that doesn't make me an expert in the sense of being able to spot a phony. I just wouldn't have to refer to any texts."

"So take yourself, you know, or somebody else who spent all his life studyin' Hemingway. He puts all he's got into writin' these stories—he knows the people who are gonna be readin' 'em; knows what they're gonna look for. And he hires like an expert forger to make the pages look like they came out of Hemingway's machine. So could it work?"

Baird pursed his lips and for a moment looked professorial. Then he sort of laughed, one syllable through his nose. "Maybe it could. A man did a similar thing when I was a boy, counterfeiting the memoirs of Howard Hughes. He made millions."

"Millions?"

"Back when that was real money. Went to jail when they found out, of course."

"And the money was still there when he got out."

"Never read anything about it. I guess so."

"So the next question is, how much stuff are we talkin' about? How much was in that old overnight bag?"

"That depends on who you believe. There was half a novel and some poetry. The short stories, there might have been as few as eleven or as many as thirty."

"That'd take a long time to write."

"It would take forever. You couldn't just 'do' Hemingway; you'd have to figure out what the stories were about, then reconstruct his early style—do you know how many Hemingway scholars there are in the world?"

"Huh uh. Quite a few."

"Thousands. Maybe ten thousand academics who know enough to spot a careless fake."

Castle nodded, cogitating. "You'd have to be real careful. But then you wouldn't have to do all the short stories and poems, would you? You could say all you found was the part of the novel. Hell, you could sell that as a book."

The odd laugh again. "Sure you could. Be a fortune in it."

"How much? A million bucks?"

"A million . . . maybe. Well, sure. The last new Hemingway made at least that much, allowing for inflation. And he's more popular now."

Castle took a big gulp of beer and set his glass down decisively. "So what the hell are we waiting for?"

Baird's bland smile faded. "You're serious?"

2. in our time

Got a ripple in the Hemingway channel.

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Twenties again?

No, funny, this one's in the 1990s. See if you can track it down?

Sure. Go down to the armory first and—

Look—no bloodbaths this time. You solve one problem and start ten more.

Couldn't be helped. It's no tea party, twentieth century America. Just use good judgment. That Ransom guy....

Manson. Right. That was a mistake.

3. A Way You'll Never Be

You can't cheat an honest man, as Sylvester Castlemaine well knew, but then again, it never hurts to find out just how honest a man is. John Baird refused his scheme, with good humor at first, but when Castle persisted, his refusal took on a sarcastic edge; maybe a tinge of outrage. He backed off and changed the subject, talking for a half-hour about commercial fishing around Key West, and then said he had to run. He slipped his business card into John's shirt pocket on the way out. (Sylvester Castlemaine, Consultant, it claimed.)

John left the place soon, walking slowly through the afternoon heat. He was glad he hadn't brought the bicycle; it was pleasant to walk in the shade of the big aromatic trees, a slight breeze on his face from the Gulf side.

One could do it. One could. The problem divided itself into three parts; writing the novel fragment, forging the manuscript, and devising a suitable story about how one had uncovered the manuscript.

The writing part would be the hardest. Hemingway is easy enough to parody—one fourth of the take-home final he gave in English 733 was to write a page of Hemingway pastiche, and some of his graduate students did a credible job—but parody was exactly what one would not want to do.

It had been a crucial period in Hemingway's development, those three years of apprenticeship the lost manuscripts represented. Two stories survived, and they were maddeningly dissimilar. "My Old Man," which had slipped down behind a drawer, was itself a pastiche, reading like pretty good Sherwood Anderson, but with an O. Henry twist at the end—very unlike the bleak understated quality that would distinguish the stories that were to make Hemingway's reputation. The other, "Up in Michigan," had been out in the mail at the time of the loss. It was a lot closer to Hemingway's ultimate style, a spare and, by the standards of the time, pornographic description of a woman's first sexual experience.

John riffled through the notes on the yellow pad, a talismanic gesture, since he could have remembered any page with little effort. But the sight of the words and the feel of the paper sometimes helped him think.

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One would not do it, of course. Except perhaps as a mental exercise. Not to show to anybody. Certainly not to profit from.

You wouldn't want to use "My Old Man" as the model, certainly; no one would care to publish a pastiche of a pastiche of Anderson, now undeservedly obscure. So "Up in Michigan." And the first story he wrote after the loss, "Out of Season," would also be handy. That had a lot of the true Hemingway strength.

You wouldn't want to tackle the novel fragment, of course, not just as an exercise, over a hundred pages. . . .

Without thinking about it, John dropped into a familiar fugue state as he walked through the rundown neighborhood, his freak memory taking over while his body ambled along on autopilot. This is the way he usually remembered pages. He transported himself back to the Hemingway collection at the JFK Library in Boston, last November, snow swirling outside the big picture windows overlooking the harbor, the room so cold he was wearing coat and gloves and could see his breath. They didn't normally let you wear a coat up there, afraid you might squirrel away a page out of the manuscript collection, but they had to make an exception because the heat pump was down.

He was flipping through the much-thumbed Xerox of Carlos Baker's interview with Hadley, page 52: "Stolen suitcase," Baker asked; "lost novel?"

The typescript of her reply appeared in front of him, more clear than the cracked sidewalk his feet negotiated: "This novel was a knock-out, about Nick, up north in Michigan—hunting, fishing, all sorts of experiences—stuff on the order of "Big Two-Hearted River," with more action. Girl experiences well done, too." With an enigmatic addition, evidently in Hadley's handwriting, "Girl experiences too well done."

That was interesting. John hadn't thought about that, since he'd been concentrating on the short stories. Too well done? There had been a lot of talk in the eighties about Hemingway's sexual ambiguity—*gender* ambiguity, actually—could Hadley have been upset, sixty years after the fact, remembering some confidence that Hemingway had revealed to the world in that novel; something girls knew that boys were not supposed to know? Playful pillow talk that was filed away for eventual literary exploitation?

He used his life that way. A good writer remembered everything and then forgot it when he sat down to write, and reinvented it so the writing would be more real than the memory. Experience was important, but imagination was more important.

Maybe I would be a better writer, John thought, if I could learn how to forget. For about the tenth time today, like any day, he regretted not having tried to succeed as a writer, while he still had the independent income. Teaching and research had fascinated him when he was younger, a rich boy's all-consuming hobbies, but the end of this fiscal year would be the end of the monthly checks from the trust fund. So the salary from

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Boston University wouldn't be mad money any more, but rent and groceries in a city suddenly expensive.

Yes, the writing would be the hard part. Then forging the manuscript, that wouldn't be easy. Any scholar would have access to copies of thousands of pages that Hemingway typed before and after the loss. Could one find the typewriter Hemingway had used? Then duplicate his idiosyncratic typing style—a moment's reflection put a sample in front of him, spaces before and after periods and commas. . . .

He snapped out of the reverie as his right foot hit the first step on the back staircase up to their rented flat. He automatically stepped over the fifth step, the rotted one, and was thinking about a nice tall glass of iced tea as he opened the screen door.

"Scorpions!" his wife screamed, two feet from his face.

"What?"

"We have scorpions!" Lena grabbed his arm and hauled him to the kitchen.

"Look!" She pointed at the opaque plastic skylight. Three scorpions, each about six inches long, cast sharp silhouettes on the milky plastic. One was moving.

"My word."

"Your *word!*" She struck a familiar pose, hands on hips, and glared up at the creatures. "What are we going to do about it?"

"We could name them."

"John."

"I don't know." He opened the refrigerator. "Call the bug man."

"The bug man was just here yesterday. He probably flushed them out."

He poured a glass of cold tea and dumped two envelopes of artificial sweetener into it. "I'll talk to Julio about it. But you know they've been there all along. They're not bothering anybody."

"They're bothering the hell out of me!"

He smiled. "Okay. I'll talk to Julio." He looked into the oven. "Thought about dinner?"

"Anything you want to cook, sweetheart. I'll be damned if I'm going to stand there with three . . . poisonous . . . arthropods staring down at me."

"Poised to jump," John said, and looked up again. There were only two visible now, which made his skin crawl.

"Julio wasn't home when I first saw them. About an hour ago."

"I'll go check." John went downstairs and Julio, the landlord, was indeed home, but was not impressed by the problem. He agreed that it was probably the bug man, and they would probably go back to where they came from in a while, and gave John a flyswatter.

John left the flyswatter with Lena, admonishing her to take no prisoners, and walked a couple of blocks to a Chinese restaurant. He brought back a few boxes of take-out, and they sat in the living room and wielded chopsticks in silence, listening for the pitter-patter of tiny feet.

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"Met a real live con man today." He put the business card on the coffee table between them.

"Consultant?" she read.

"He had a loony scheme about counterfeiting the missing stories." Lena knew more about the missing stories than 98 percent of the people who Hemingway'ed for a living. John liked to think out loud.

"Ah, the stories," she said, preparing herself.

"Not a bad idea, actually, if one had a larcenous nature." He concentrated for a moment on the slippery Moo Goo Gai Pan. "Be millions of bucks in it."

He was bent over the box. She stared hard at his bald spot. "What exactly did he have in mind?"

"We didn't bother to think it through in any detail, actually. You go and find. . . ." He got the slightly wall-eyed look that she knew meant he was reading a page of a book a thousand miles away. "Yes. A 1921 Corona portable, like the one Hadley gave him before they were married. Find some old paper. Type up the stories. Take them to Sotheby's. Spend money for the rest of your life. That's all there is to it."

"You left out jail."

"A mere detail. Also the writing of the stories. That could take weeks. Maybe you could get arrested first, write the stories in jail, and then sell them when you got out."

"You're weird, John."

"Well. I didn't give him any encouragement."

"Maybe you should've. A few million would come in handy next year."

"We'll get by."

" 'We'll get by.' You keep saying that. How do you know? You've never had to 'get by.' "

"Okay, then. We won't get by." He scraped up the last of the fried rice. "We won't be able to make the rent and they'll throw us out on the street. We'll live in a cardboard box over a heating grate. You'll have to sell your body to keep me in cheap wine. But we'll be happy, dear." He looked up at her, mooning. "Poor but happy."

"Slap-happy." She looked at the card again. "How do you know he's a con man?"

"I don't know. Salesman type. Says he's in commercial fishing now, but he doesn't seem to like it much."

"He didn't say anything about any, you know, criminal stuff he'd done in the past?"

"Huh uh. I just got the impression that he didn't waste a lot of time mulling over ethics and morals." John held up the Mont Blanc pen. "He was staring at this, before he came over and introduced himself. I think he smelled money."

Lena stuck both chopsticks into the half-finished carton of boiled rice and set it down decisively. "Let's ask him over."

"He's a sleaze, Lena. You wouldn't like him."

"I've never met a real con man. It would be fun."

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He looked into the darkened kitchen. "Will you cook something?"
She followed his gaze, expecting monsters. "If you stand guard."

4. Romance is Dead
subtitle
The Hell it is

"Be a job an' a half," Castle said, mopping up residual spaghetti sauce with a piece of garlic bread. "It's not like your Howard Hughes guy, or Hitler's notebooks."

"You've been doing some research," John's voice was a little slurred. He'd bought a half-gallon of Portuguese wine, the bottle wrapped in straw like cheap Chianti, the wine not quite that good. If you could get past the first couple of glasses, it was okay. It had been okay to John for some time now.

"Yeah, down to the library. The guys who did the Hitler notebooks, hell, nobody'd ever seen a real Hitler notebook; they just studied his handwriting in letters and such, then read up on what he did day after day. Same with the Howard Hughes, but that was even easier, because most of the time nobody knew what the hell Howard Hughes was doing anyhow. Just stayed locked up in that room."

"The Hughes forgery nearly worked, as I recall," John said. "If Hughes himself hadn't broken silence. . . ."

"Ya gotta know that took balls. 'Scuse me, Lena." She waved a hand and laughed. "Try to get away with that while Hughes was still alive."

"How did the Hitler people screw up?" she asked.

"Funny thing about that one was how many people they fooled. Afterwards everybody said it was a really lousy fake. But you can bet that before the newspapers bid millions of dollars on it, they showed it to the best Hitler-ologists they could find, and they all said it was real."

"Because they wanted it to be real," Lena said.

"Yeah. But one of the pages had some chemical in it that wouldn't be in paper before 1945. That was kinda dumb."

"People would want the Hemingway stories to be real," Lena said quietly, to John.

John's gaze stayed fixed on the center of the table, where a few strands of spaghetti lay cold and drying in a plastic bowl. "Wouldn't be honest."

"That's for sure," Castle said cheerily. "But it ain't exactly armed robbery, either."

"A gross misuse of intellectual . . . intellectual. . . ."

"It's past your bedtime, John," Lena said. "We'll clean up." John nodded and pushed himself away from the table and walked heavily into the bedroom.

Lena didn't say anything until she heard the bedsprings creak. "He isn't always like this," she said quietly.

"Yeah. He don't act like no alky."

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"It's been a hard year for him." She refilled her glass. "Me, too. Money."

"That's bad."

"Well, we knew it was coming. He tell you about the inheritance?"

Castle leaned forward. "Huh uh."

"He was born pretty well off. Family had textile mills up in New Hampshire. John's grandparents died in an auto accident in the forties and the family sold off the mills—good timing, too. They wouldn't be worth much today.

"Then John's father and mother died in the sixties, while he was in college. The executors set up a trust fund that looked like it would keep him in pretty good shape forever. But he wasn't interested in money. He even joined the army, to see what it was like."

"Jesus."

"Afterwards, he carried a picket sign and marched against the war—you know, Vietnam.

"Then he finished his Ph.D. and started teaching. The trust fund must have been fifty times as much as his salary, when he started out. It was still ten times as much, a couple of years ago."

"Boy . . . howdy." Castle was doing mental arithmetic and algebra with variables like Porsches and fast boats.

"But he let his sisters take care of it. He let them re-invest the capital."

"They weren't too swift?"

"They were idiots! They took good solid blue-chip stocks and tax-free municipals, too 'boring' for them, and threw it all away gambling on commodities." She grimaced. "*Pork* bellies? I finally had John go to Chicago and come back with what was left of his money. There wasn't much."

"You ain't broke, though."

"Damned near. There's enough income to pay for insurance and eventually we'll be able to draw on an IRA. But the cash payments stop in two months. We'll have to live on John's salary. I suppose I'll get a job, too."

"What you ought to get is a typewriter."

Lena laughed and slouched back in her chair. "That would be something."

"You think he could do it? I mean if he would, do you think he could?"

"He's a good writer." She looked thoughtful. "He's had some stories published, you know, in the literary magazines. The ones that pay four or five free copies."

"Big deal."

She shrugged. "Pays off in the long run. Tenure. But I don't know whether being able to write a good literary story means that John could write a good Hemingway imitation."

"He knows enough, right?"

"Maybe he knows too much. He might be paralyzed by his own standards." She shook her head. "In some ways he's an absolute nut about Hemingway. Obsessed, I mean. It's not good for him."

"Maybe writing this stuff would get it out of his system."

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She smiled at him. "You've got more angles than a protractor."

"Sorry; I didn't mean to—"

"No." She raised both hands. "Don't be sorry; I like it. I like you, Castle. John's a good man but sometimes he's too good."

He poured them both more wine. "Nobody ever accused me of that."

"I suspect not." She paused. "Have you ever been in trouble with the police? Just curious."

"Why?"

"Just curious."

He laughed. "Nickel and dime stuff, when I was a kid. You know, jus' to see what you can get away with." He turned serious. "Then I pulled two months' hard time for somethin' I didn't do. Wasn't even in town when it happened."

"What was it?"

"Armed robbery. Then the guy came back an' hit the same god-damned store! I mean, he was one sharp cookie. He confessed to the first one and they let me go."

"Why did they accuse you in the first place?"

"Used to think it was somebody had it in for me. Like the clerk who fingered me." He took a sip of wine. "But hell. It was just dumb luck. And dumb cops. The guy was about my height, same color hair, we both lived in the neighborhood. Cops didn't want to waste a lot of time on it. Jus' chuck me in jail."

"So you do have a police record?"

"Huh uh. Girl from the ACLU made sure they wiped it clean. She wanted me to go after 'em for what, false arrest an' wrongful imprisonment. I just wanted to get out of town."

"It wasn't here?"

"Nah. Dayton, Ohio. Been here eight, nine years."

"That's good."

"Why the third degree?"

She leaned forward and patted the back of his hand. "Call it a job interview, Castle. I have a feeling we may be working together."

"Okay." He gave her a slow smile. "Anything else you want to know?"

5. The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife

John trudged into the kitchen the next morning, ignored the coffeepot, and pulled a green bottle of beer out of the fridge. He looked up at the skylight. Four scorpions, none of them moving. Have to call the bug man today.

Red wine hangover, the worst kind. He was too old for this. Cheap red wine hangover. He eased himself into a soft chair and carefully poured the beer down the side of the glass. Not too much noise, please.

When you drink too much, you ought to take a couple of aspirin, and

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some vitamins, and all the water you can hold, before retiring. If you drink too much, of course, you don't remember to do that.

The shower turned off with a bass clunk of plumbing. John winced and took a long drink, which helped a little. When he heard the bathroom door open he called for Lena to bring the aspirin when she came out.

After a few minutes she brought it out and handed it to him. "And how is Dr. Baird today?"

"Dr. Baird needs a doctor. Or an undertaker." He shook out two aspirin and washed them down with the last of the beer. "Like your outfit."

She was wearing only a towel around her head. She simpered and struck a dancer's pose and spun daintily around. "Think it'll catch on?"

"Oh my yes." At thirty-five, she still had the trim model's figure that had caught his eye in the classroom, fifteen years before. A safe, light tan was uniform all over her body, thanks to liberal sunblock and the private sunbathing area on top of the house—private except for the helicopter that came low overhead every weekday at 1:15. She always tried to be there in time to wave at it. The pilot had such white teeth. She wondered how many sunbathers were on his route.

She undid the towel and rubbed her long blonde hair vigorously. "Thought I'd cool off for a few minutes before I got dressed. Too much wine, eh?"

"Couldn't you tell from my sparkling repartee last night?" He leaned back, eyes closed, and rolled the cool glass back and forth on his forehead.

"Want another beer?"

"Yeah. Coffee'd be smarter, though."

"It's been sitting all night."

"Pay for my sins." He watched her swivel lightly into the kitchen and, more than ever before, felt the difference in their ages. Seventeen years; he was half again as old as she. A young man would say the hell with the hangover, go grab that luscious thing and carry her back to bed. The organ that responded to this meditation was his stomach, though, and it responded very audibly.

"Some toast, too. Or do you want something fancier?"

"Toast would be fine." Why was she being so nice? Usually if he drank too much, he reaped the whirlwind in the morning.

"Ugh." She saw the scorpions. "Five of them now."

"I wonder how many it will hold before it comes crashing down. Scorpions everywhere, stunned. Then angry."

"I'm sure the bug man knows how to get rid of them."

"In Africa they claimed that if you light a ring of fire around them with gasoline or lighter fluid, they go crazy, run amok, stinging themselves to death in their frenzies. Maybe the bug man could do that."

"Castle and I came up with a plan last night. It's kinda screwy but it might just work."

"Read that in a book called *Jungle Ways*. I was eight years old and believed every word of it."

"We figured out a way that it would be legal. Are you listening?"

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"Uh huh. Let me have real sugar and some milk."

She poured some milk in a cup and put it in the microwave to warm. "Maybe we should talk about it later."

"Oh no. Hemingway forgery. You figured out a way to make it legal. Go ahead. I'm all ears."

"See, you tell the publisher first off what it is, that you wrote it and then had it typed up to look authentic."

"Sure, be a big market for that."

"In fact, there could be. You'd have to generate it, but it could happen." The toast sprang up and she brought it and two cups of coffee into the living room on a tray. "See, the bogus manuscript is only one part of a book."

"I don't get it." He tore the toast into strips, to dunk in the strong Cuban coffee.

"The rest of the book is in the nature of an exegesis of your own text."

"If that con man knows what exegesis is, then I can crack a safe."

"That part's my idea. You're really writing a book *about* Hemingway. You use your own text to illustrate various points—'I wrote it this way instead of that way because. . . .' "

"It would be different," he conceded. "Perhaps the second most egotistical piece of Hemingway scholarship in history. A dubious distinction."

"You could write it tongue-in-cheek, though. It could be really amusing, as well as scholarly."

"God, we'd have to get an unlisted number, publishers calling us night and day. Movie producers. Might sell ten copies, if I bought nine."

"You really aren't getting it, John. You don't have a particle of larceny in your heart."

He put a hand on his heart and looked down. "Ventricles, auricles. My undying love for you, a little heartburn. No particles."

"See, you tell the publisher the truth . . . but the publisher doesn't have to tell the truth. Not until publication day."

"Okay. I still don't get it."

She took a delicate nibble of toast. "It goes like this. They print the bogus Hemingway up into a few copies of bogus bound galleys. Top secret."

"My exegesis carefully left off."

"That's the ticket. They send it out to a few selected scholars, along with Xeroxes of a few sample manuscript pages. All they say, in effect, is 'Does this seem authentic to you? Please keep it under your hat, for obvious reasons.' Then they sit back and collect blurbs."

"I can see the kind of blurbs they'd get from Scott or Mike or Jack, for intance. Some variation of 'What kind of idiot do you think I am?' "

"Those aren't the kind of people you send it to, dope! You send it to people who think they're experts, but aren't. Castle says this is how the Hitler thing almost worked—they knew better than to show it to historians in general. They showed it to a few people and didn't quote the

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ones who thought it was a fake. Surely you can come up with a list of people who would be easy to fool."

"Any scholar could. Be a different list for each one; I'd be on some of them."

"So they bring it out on April Fool's Day. You get the front page of the New York *Times Book Review*. *Publisher's Weekly* does a story. Everybody wants to be in on the joke. Bestseller list, here we come."

"Yeah, sure, but you haven't thought it through." He leaned back, balancing the coffee cup on his slight pot belly. "What about the guys who give us the blurbs, those second-rate scholars? They're going to look pretty bad."

"We did think of that. No way they could sue, not if the letter accompanying the galleys is carefully written. It doesn't have to say—"

"I don't mean getting sued. I mean I don't want to be responsible for hurting other people's careers—maybe wrecking a career, if the person was too extravagant in his endorsement, and had people looking for things to use against him. You know departmental politics. People go down the chute for less serious crimes than making an ass of yourself and your institution in print."

She put her cup down with a clatter. "You're always thinking about other people. Why don't you think about yourself for a change?" She was on the verge of tears. "Think about *us*."

"All right, let's do that. What do you think would happen to my career at BU if I pissed off the wrong people with this exercise? How long do you think it would take me to make full professor? Do you think BU would make a full professor out of a man who uses his specialty to pull vicious practical jokes?"

"Just do me the favor of thinking about it. Cool down and weigh the pluses and minuses. If you did it with the right touch, your department would love it—and God, Harry wants to get rid of the chairmanship so bad he'd give it to an axe murderer. You know you'll make full professor about thirty seconds before Harry hands you the keys to the office and runs."

"True enough." He finished the coffee and stood up in a slow creak. "I'll give it some thought. Horizontally." He turned toward the bedroom.

"Want some company?"

He looked at her for a moment. "Indeed I do."

6. in our time

Back already?

Need to find a meta-causal. One guy seems to be generating the danger flag in various timelines. John Baird, who's a scholar in some of them, a soldier in some, and a rich playboy in a few. He's always a Hemingway nut, though. He does something that starts off the ripples in '95, '96, '97; depending on which timeline you're

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in—but I can't seem to get close to it. There's something odd about him, and it doesn't have to do with Hemingway specifically.

But he's definitely causing the eddy?

Has to be him.

All right. Find a meta-causal that all the doom lines have in common, and forget about the others. Then go talk to him.

There'll be resonance—

But who cares? Moot after A.D. 2006.

That's true. I'll hit all the doom lines at once, then: neutralize the meta-causal, then jump ahead and do some spot checks.

Good. And no killing this time.

I understand. But—

You're too close to 2006. Kill the wrong person and the whole thing could unravel.

Well, there are differences of opinion. We would certainly feel it if the world failed to come to an end in those lines.

As you say, differences of opinion. My opinion is that you better not kill anybody or I'll send you back to patrol the fourteenth century again.

Understood. But I can't guarantee that I can neutralize the meta-causal without eliminating John Baird.

Fourteenth century. Some people love it. Others think it was nasty, brutish, and long.

7. A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

Most of the sleuthing that makes up literary scholarship takes place in settings either neutral or unpleasant. Libraries' old stacks, attics metaphorical and actual; dust and silverfish, yellowed paper and fading ink. Books and letters that appear in card files but not on shelves.

Hemingway researchers have a haven outside of Boston, the Hemingway Collection at the University of Massachusetts's John F. Kennedy Library. It's a triangular room with one wall dominated by a picture window that looks over Boston Harbor to the sea. Comfortable easy chairs surround a coffee table, but John had never seen them in use; work tables under the picture window provided realistic room for computer and clutter. Skins from animals the Hemingways had dispatched in Africa snarled up from the floor, and one wall was dominated by Hemingway memorabilia and photographs. What made the room Nirvana, though, was row upon row of boxes containing tens of thousands of Xerox pages of Hemingway correspondence, manuscripts, clippings—everything from a boyhood shopping list to all extant versions of every short story and poem and novel.

John liked to get there early so he could claim one of the three computers. He snapped it on, inserted a CD, and typed in his code number. Then he keyed in the database index and started searching.

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The more commonly requested items would appear on screen if you asked for them—whenever someone requested a physical copy of an item, an electronic copy automatically was sent into the database—but most of the things John needed were obscure, and he had to haul down the letter boxes and physically flip through them, just like some poor scholar inhabiting the first nine tenths of the twentieth century.

Time disappeared for him as he abandoned his notes and followed lines of instinct, leaping from letter to manuscript to note to interview, doing what was in essence the opposite of the scholar's job: a scholar would normally be trying to find out what these stories had been about. John instead was trying to track down every reference that might restrict what he himself could write about, simulating the stories.

The most confining restriction was the one he'd first remembered, walking away from the bar where he'd met Castle. The one-paragraph answer that Hadley had given to Carlos Baker about the unfinished novel; that it was a Nick Adams story about hunting and fishing up in Michigan. John didn't know anything about hunting and most of his fishing experience was limited to watching a bobber and hoping it wouldn't go down and break his train of thought.

There was the one story that Hemingway had left unpublished, "Boys and Girls Together," mostly clumsy self-parody. It covered the right period and the right activities, but using it as a source would be sensitive business, tip-toeing through a minefield. Anyone looking for a fake would go straight there. Of course John could go up to the Michigan woods and camp out, see things for himself and try to recreate them in the Hemingway style. Later, though. First order of business was to make sure there was nothing in this huge collection that would torpedo the whole project—some postcard where Hemingway said "You're going to like this novel because it has a big scene about cleaning fish."

The short stories would be less restricted in subject matter. According to Hemingway, they'd been about growing up in Oak Park and Michigan and the battlefields of Italy.

That made him stop and think. The one dramatic experience he shared with Hemingway was combat—fifty years later, to be sure, in Vietnam, but the basic situations couldn't have changed that much. Terror, heroism, cowardice. The guns and grenades were a little more streamlined, but they did the same things to people. Maybe do a World War I story as a finger exercise, see whether it would be realistic to try a longer growing-up-in-Michigan pastiche.

He made a note to himself about that on the computer, oblique enough not to be damning, and continued the eyestraining job of searching through Hadley's correspondence, trying to find some further reference to the lost novel—damn!

Writing to Ernest's mother, Hadley noted that "the taxi driver broke his typewriter" on the way to the Constantinople conference—did he get it fixed, or just chuck it? A quick check showed that the typeface of his manuscripts did indeed change after July 1924. So they'd never be able

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to find it. There were typewriters in Hemingway shrines in Key West, Billings, Schruns; the initial plan had been to find which was the old Corona, then locate an identical one and have Castle arrange a swap.

So they would fall back on Plan B. Castle had claimed to be good with mechanical things, and thought if they could find a 1921 Corona, he could tweak the keys around so they would produce a convincing manuscript—lower-case "s" a hair low, "e" a hair high, and so forth.

How he could be so sure of success without ever having seen the inside of a manual typewriter, John did not know. Nor did he have much confidence.

But it wouldn't have to be a perfect simulation, since they weren't out to fool the whole world, but just a few reviewers who would only see two or three Xeroxed pages. He could probably do a close enough job. John put it out of his mind and moved on to the next letter.

But it was an odd coincidence for him to think about Castle at that instant, since Castle was thinking about him. Or at least asking.

8. The Coming Man

"How was he when he was younger?"

"He never was younger." She laughed and rolled around inside the compass of his arms to face him. "Than you, I mean. He was in his mid-thirties when we met. You can't be much over twenty-five."

He kissed the end of her nose. "Thirty this year. But I still get carded sometimes."

"I'm a year older than you are. So you have to do anything I say."

"So far so good." He'd checked her wallet when she'd gone into the bathroom to insert the diaphragm, and knew she was thirty-five. "Break out the whips and chains now?"

"Not till next week. Work up to it slowly." She pulled away from him and mopped her front with the sheet. "You're good at being slow."

"I like being asked to come back."

"How 'bout tonight and tomorrow morning?"

"If you feed me lots of vitamins. How long you think he'll be up in Boston?"

"He's got a train ticket for Wednesday. But he said he might stay longer if he got onto something."

Castle laughed. "Or into something. Think he might have a girl up there? Some student like you used to be?"

"That would be funny. I guess it's not impossible." She covered her eyes with the back of her hand. "The wife is always the last to know."

They both laughed. "But I don't think so. He's a sweet guy but he's just not real sexy. I think his students see him as kind of a favorite uncle."

"You fell for him once."

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"Uh huh. He had all of his current virtues plus a full head of hair, no pot belly—and, hm, what am I forgetting?"

"He was hung like an elephant?"

"No, I guess it was the millions of dollars. That can be pretty sexy."

9. Wanderings

It was a good thing John liked to nose around obscure neighborhoods shopping; you couldn't walk into any old K-Mart and pick up a 1921 Corona portable. In fact, you couldn't walk into any typewriter shop in Boston and find one, not any. Nowadays they all sold self-contained word processors, with a few dusty electrics in the back room. A few had fancy manual typewriters from Italy or Switzerland; it had been almost thirty years since the American manufacturers had made a machine that wrote without electronic help.

He had a little better luck with pawnshops. Lots of Smith-Coronas, a few L.C. Smiths, and two actual Coronas that might have been old enough. One had too large a typeface and the other, although the typeface was the same as Hemingway's, was missing a couple of letters: Th quick b own fox jump d ov th lazy dog. The challenge of writing a convincing Hemingway novel without using the letters "e" and "r" seemed daunting. He bought the machine anyhow, thinking they might ultimately have two or several broken ones that could be concatenated into one reliable machine.

The old pawnbroker rang up his purchase and made change and slammed the cash drawer shut. "Now you don't look to me like the kind of man who would hold it against a man who. . . ." He shrugged. "Well, who sold you something and then suddenly remembered that there was a place with lots of those somethings?"

"Of course not. Business is business."

"I don't know the name of the guy or his shop; I think he calls it a museum. Up in Brunswick, Maine. He's got a thousand old typewriters. He buys, sells, trades. That's the only place I know of you might find one with the missing whatever-you-call-ems."

"Fonts." He put the antique typewriter under his arm—the handle was missing—and shook the old man's hand. "Thanks a lot. This might save me weeks."

With some difficulty John got together packing materials and shipped the machine to Key West, along with Xeroxes of a few dozen pages of Hemingway's typed copy and a note suggesting Castle see what he could do. Then he went to the library and found a Brunswick telephone directory. Under "Office Machines & Supplies" was listed Crazy Tom's Typewriter Museum and Sales Emporium. John rented a car and headed north.

The small town had rolled up its sidewalks by the time he got there. He drove past Crazy Tom's and pulled into the first motel. It had a neon

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VACANCY sign but the innkeeper had to be roused from a deep sleep. He took John's credit card number and directed him to Room 14 and pointedly turned on the NO sign. There were only two other cars in the motel lot.

John slept late and treated himself to a full "trucker's" breakfast at the local diner: two pork chops and eggs and hash browns. Then he worked off ten calories by walking to the shop.

Crazy Tom was younger than John had expected, thirtyish with an unruly shock of black hair. A manual typewriter lay upside-down on an immaculate work table, but most of the place was definitely maculate. Thousands of peanut shells littered the floor. Crazy Tom was eating them compulsively from a large wooden bowl. When he saw John standing in the doorway, he offered some. "Unsalted," he said. "Good for you."

John crunched his way over the peanut-shell carpet. The only light in the place was the bare bulb suspended over the work table, though two unlit high-intensity lamps were clamped on either side of it. The walls were floor-to-ceiling gloomy shelves holding hundreds of typewriters, mostly black.

"Let me guess," the man said as John scooped up a handful of peanuts. "You're here about a typewriter."

"A specific one. A 1921 Corona portable."

"Ah." He closed his eyes in thought. "Hemingway. His first. Or I guess the first after he started writing. A '27 Corona, now, that'd be Faulkner."

"You get a lot of calls for them?"

"Couple times a year. People hear about this place and see if they can find one like the master used, whoever the master is to them. Sympathetic magic and all that. But you aren't a writer."

"I've had some stories published."

"Yeah, but you look too comfortable. You do something else. Teach school." He looked around in the gloom. "Corona Corona." Then he sang the six syllables to the tune of "Corina, Corina." He walked a few steps into the darkness and returned with a small machine and set it on the table. "Newer than 1920 because of the way it says 'Corona' here. Older than 1927 because of the tab set-up." He found a piece of paper and a chair. "Go on, try it."

John typed out a few quick foxes and aids to one's party. The typeface was identical to the one on the machine Hadley had given Hemingway before they'd been married. The up-and-down-displacements of the letters were different, of course, but Castle should be able to fix that once he'd practiced with the back-up machine.

John cracked a peanut. "How much?"

"What you need it for?"

"Why is that important?"

"It's the only one I got. Rather rent it than sell it." He didn't look like he was lying, trying to push the price up. "A thousand to buy, a hundred a month to rent."

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"Tell you what, then. I buy it, and if it doesn't bring me luck, you agree to buy it back at a pro ratum. My one thousand dollars minus ten percent per month."

Crazy Tom stuck out his hand. "Let's have a beer on it."

"Isn't it a little early for that?"

"Not if you eat peanuts all morning." He took two long-necked Budweisers from a cooler and set them on paper towels on the table. "So what kind of stuff you write?"

"Short stories and some poetry." The beer was good after the heavy greasy breakfast. "Nothing you would've seen unless you read magazines like *Iowa Review* and *Triquarterly*."

"Oh yeah. Foldouts of Gertrude Stein and H.D. I might've read your stuff."

"John Baird."

He shook his head. "Maybe. I'm no good with names."

"If you recognized my name from *The Iowa Review* you'd be the first person who ever had."

"I was right about the Hemingway connection?"

"Of course."

"But you don't write like Hemingway for no *Iowa Review*. Short declarative sentences, truly this truly that."

"No, you were right about the teaching, too. I teach Hemingway up at Boston University."

"So that's why the typewriter? Play show and tell with your students?"

"That, too. Mainly I want to write some on it and see how it feels."

From the back of the shop, a third person listened to the conversation with great interest. He, it, wasn't really a "person," though he could look like one: he had never been born and he would never die. But then he didn't really exist, not in the down-home pinch-yourself-ouch! way that you and I do.

In another way, he did *more* than exist, since he could slip back and forth between places you and I don't even have words for.

He was carrying a wand that could be calibrated for heart attack, stroke, or metastasized cancer on one end; the other end induced a kind of aphasia. He couldn't use it unless he materialized. He walked toward the two men, making no crunching sounds on the peanut shells because he weighed less than a thought. He studied John Baird's face from about a foot away.

"I guess it's a mystical thing, though I'm uncomfortable with that word. See whether I can get into his frame of mind."

"Funny thing," Crazy Tom said; "I never thought of him typing out his stories. He was always sitting in some café writing in notebooks, piling up saucers."

"You've read a lot about him?" That would be another reason not to try the forgery. This guy comes out of the woodwork and says "I sold John Baird a 1921 Corona portable."

"Hell, all I do is read. If I get two customers a day, one of 'em's a

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mistake and the other just wants directions. I've read all of Hemingway's fiction and most of the journalism and I think all of the poetry. Not just the *Querschnitt* period; the more interesting stuff."

The invisible man was puzzled. Quite obviously John Baird planned some sort of Hemingway forgery. But then he should be growing worried over this man's dangerous expertise. Instead, he was radiating relief.

What course of action, inaction? He could go back a few hours in time and steal this typewriter, though he would have to materialize for that, and it would cause suspicions. And Baird could find another. He could kill one or both of them, now or last week or next, but that would mean duty in the fourteenth century for more than forever—when you exist out of time, a century of unpleasantness is long enough for planets to form and die.

He wouldn't have been drawn to this meeting if it were not a strong causal nexus. There must be earlier ones, since John Baird did not just stroll down a back street in this little town and decide to change history by buying a typewriter. But the earlier ones must be too weak, or something was masking them.

Maybe it was a good timeplace to get John Baird alone and explain things to him. Then use the wand on him. But no, not until he knew exactly what he was preventing. With considerable effort of will and expenditure of something like energy, he froze time at this instant and traveled to a couple of hundred adjacent realities that were all in this same bundle of doomed timelines.

In most of them, Baird was here in Crazy Tom's Typewriter Museum and Sales Emporium. In some, he was in a similar place in New York. In two, he was back in the Hemingway collection. In one, John Baird didn't exist: the whole planet was a lifeless blasted cinder. He'd known about that timeline; it had been sort of a dry run.

"He did both," John then said in most of the timelines. "Sometimes typing, sometimes fountain pen or pencil. I've seen the rough draft of his first novel. Written out in a stack of seven French schoolkids' copybooks." He looked around, memory working. A red herring wouldn't hurt. He'd never come across a reference to any other specific Hemingway typewriter, but maybe this guy had. "You know what kind of machine he used in Key West or Havana?"

Crazy Tom pulled on his chin. "Nope. Bring me a sample of the typing and I might be able to pin it down, though. And I'll keep an eye out—got a card?"

John took out a business card and his checkbook. "Take a check on a Boston bank?"

"Sure. I'd take one on a Tierra del Fuego bank. Who'd stiff you on a seventy-year-old typewriter?" Sylvester Castlemaine might, John thought. "I've had this business almost twenty years," Tom continued; "not a single bounced check or bent plastic."

"Yeah," John said. "Why would a crook want an old typewriter?" The invisible man laughed and went away.

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10. Banal Story

Dear Lena & Castle,

Typing this on the new/old machine to give you an idea about what has to be modified to mimic EH's:

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

234567890,./ "#$%_&'()*?

Other mechanical things to think about --

1. Paper -- One thing that made people suspicious about the Hitler forgery is that experts know that old paper smells old. And of course there was that fatal chemical-composition error that clinched it.

As we discussed, my first thought was that one of us would have to go to Paris and nose around in old attics and so forth, trying to find either a stack of 75-year-old paper or an old blank book we could cut pages out of. But in the JFK Library collection I found out that EH actually did bring some American-made paper along with him. A lot of the rough draft of in our time -- written in Paris a year or two after our "discovery" -- was typed on the back of 6x7" stationery from his parents' vacation place in Windemere, Xerox enclosed. It should be pretty easy to duplicate on a hand press, and of course it will be a lot easier to find 75-year-old American paper. One complication, unfortunately, is that I haven't really seen the paper; only a Xerox of the pages. Have to come up with some pretext to either visit the vault or have a page brought up, so I can check the color of the ink, mem-

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orize the weight and deckle of the paper, check to see how the edges are cut . . .

I'm starting to sound like a real forger. In for a penny, though, in for a pound. One of the critics who's sent the fragment might want to see the actual document, and compare it with the existing Windemere pages.

2. Inks. This should not be a problem. Here's a recipe for typewriter ribbon ink from a 1918 book of commercial formulas:

8 oz. lampblack

4 oz. gum arabic

1 quart methylated spirits

That last one is wood alcohol. The others ought to be available in Miami if you can't find them on the Rock.

Aging the ink on the paper gets a little tricky. I haven't been able to find anything about it in the libraries around here; no FORGERY FOR FUN & PROFIT. May check in New York before coming back.

(If we don't find anything, I'd suggest baking it for a few days at a temperature low enough not to greatly affect the paper, and then interleaving it with blank sheets of the old paper and pressing them together for a few days, to restore the old smell, and further absorb the residual ink solvents.)

Toyed with the idea of actually allowing the manuscript to mildew somewhat, but that might get out of hand and actually destroy some of it -- or for all I know we'd be employing a

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species of mildew that doesn't speak French. Again, thinking like a true forger, which may be a waste of time and effort, but I have to admit is kind of fun. Playing cops and robbers at my age.

Well, I'll call tonight. Miss you, Lena.

Your partner in crime,

11. A Divine Gesture

When John returned to his place in Boston, there was a message on his answering machine: "John, this is Nelson Van Nuys. Harry told me you were in town. I left something in your box at the office and I strongly suggest you take it before somebody else does. I'll be out of town for a week, but give me a call if you're here next Friday. You can take me and Doris out to dinner at Panache."

Panache was the most expensive restaurant in Cambridge. Interesting. John checked his watch. He hadn't planned to go to the office, but there was plenty of time to swing by on his way to returning the rental car. The train didn't leave for another four hours.

Van Nuys was a fellow Hemingway scholar and sometimes drinking buddy who taught at Brown. What had he brought ninety miles to deliver in person, rather than mail? He was probably just in town and dropped by. But it was worth checking.

No one but the secretary was in the office, noontime, for which John was obscurely relieved. In his box were three interdepartmental memos, a textbook catalog, and a brown cardboard box that sloshed when he picked it up. He took it all back to his office and closed the door.

The office made him feel a little weary, as usual. He wondered whether they would be shuffling people around again this year. The department liked to keep its professors in shape by having them haul tons of books and files up and down the corridor every couple of years.

He glanced at the memos and pitched them, irrelevant since he wasn't teaching in the summer, and put the catalog in his briefcase. Then he carefully opened the cardboard box.

It was a half-pint Jack Daniel's bottle, but it didn't have bourbon in it. A cloudy greenish liquid. John unscrewed the top and with the sharp

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Pernod tang the memory came back: He and Van Nuys had wasted half an afternoon in Paris years ago, trying to track down a source of true absinthe. So he had finally found some.

Absinthe. Nectar of the gods, ruination of several generations of French artists, students, workingmen—outlawed in 1915 for its addictive and hallucinogenic qualities. Where had Van Nuys found it?

He screwed the top back on tightly and put it back in the box and put the box in his briefcase. If its effect really was all that powerful, you probably wouldn't want to drive under its influence. In Boston traffic, of course, a little lane weaving and a few mild collisions would go unnoticed.

Once he was safely on the train, he'd try a shot or two of it. It couldn't be all that potent. Child of the sixties, John had taken LSD, psilocybin, ecstasy, and peyote, and remembered with complete accuracy the quality of each drug's hallucinations. The effects of absinthe wouldn't be nearly as extreme as its modern successors. But it was probably just as well to try it first in a place where unconsciousness or Steve Allen imitations or speaking in tongues would go unremarked.

He turned in the rental car and took a cab to South Station rather than juggle suitcase, briefcase, and typewriter through the subway system. Once there, he nursed a beer through an hour of the Yankees murdering the Red Sox, and then rented a cart to roll his burden down to track 3, where a smiling porter installed him aboard the *Silver Meteor,* its range newly extended from Boston to Miami.

He had loved the train since his boyhood in Washington. His mother hated flying and so they often clickety-clacked from place to place in the snug comfort of first-class compartments. Eidetic memory blunted his enjoyment of the modern Amtrak version. This compartment was as large as the ones he had read and done puzzles in, forty years before — amazing and delighting his mother with his proficiency in word games—but the smell of good old leather was gone, replaced by plastic, and the fittings that had been polished brass were chromed steel now. On the middle of the red plastic seat was a Hospitality Pak, a plastic box encased in plastic wrap that contained a wedge of indestructible "cheese food," as if cheese had to eat, a small plastic bottle of cheap California wine, a plastic glass to contain it, and an apple, possibly not plastic.

John hung up his coat and tie in the small closet provided beside where the bed would fold down, and for a few minutes he watched with interest as his fellow passengers and their accompaniment hurried or ambled to their cars. Mostly old people, of course. Enough young ones, John hoped, to keep the trains alive a few decades more.

"Mr. Baird?" John turned to face a black porter, who bowed slightly and favored him with a blinding smile of white and gold. "My name is George, and I will be at your service as far as Atlanta. Is everything satisfactory?"

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"Doing fine. But if you could find me a glass made of glass and a couple of ice cubes, I might mention you in my will."

"One minute, sir." In fact, it took less than a minute. That was one aspect, John had to admit, that had improved in recent years: The service on Amtrak in the sixties and seventies had been right up there with Alcatraz and the Hanoi Hilton.

He closed and locked the compartment door and carefully poured about two ounces of the absinthe into the glass. Like Pernod, it turned milky on contact with the ice.

He swirled it around and breathed deeply. It did smell much like Pernod, but with an acrid tang that was probably oil of wormwood. An experimental sip: the wormwood didn't dominate the licorice flavor, but it was there.

"Thanks, Nelson," he whispered, and drank the whole thing in one cold fiery gulp. He set down the glass and the train began to move. For a weird moment that seemed hallucinatory, but it always did, the train starting off so smoothly and silently.

For about ten minutes he felt nothing unusual, as the train did its slow tour of Boston's least attractive backyards. The conductor who checked his ticket seemed like a normal human being, which could have been a hallucination.

John knew that some drugs, like amyl nitrite, hit with a swift slap, while others creep into your mind like careful infiltrators. This was the way of absinthe; all he felt was a slight alcohol buzz, and he was about to take another shot, when it subtly began.

There were *things* just at the periphery of his vision, odd things with substance, but somehow without shape, that of course moved away when he turned his head to look at them. At the same time a whispering began in his ears, just audible over the train noise, but not intelligible, as if in a language he had heard before but not understood. For some reason the effects were pleasant, though of course they could be frightening if a person were not expecting weirdness. He enjoyed the illusions for a few minutes, while the scenery outside mellowed into woodsy suburbs, and the visions and voices stopped rather suddenly.

He poured another ounce and this time diluted it with water. He remembered the sad woman in "Hills Like White Elephants" lamenting that everything new tasted like licorice, and allowed himself to wonder what Hemingway had been drinking when he wrote that curious story.

Chuckling at his own—what? Effrontery?—John took out the 1921 Corona and slipped a sheet of paper into it and balanced it on his knees. He had earlier thought of the first two lines of the WWI pastiche; he typed them down and kept going:

The dirt on the sides of the trenches was never completely dry in the morning. If Nick could find an old newspaper he

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would put it between his chest and the dirt when he went out to lean on the side of the trench and wait for the light. First light was the best time. You might have luck and see a muzzle flash. But patience was better than luck. Wait to see a helmet or a head without a helmet.

Nick looked at the enemy line through a rectangular box of wood that went through the trench at about ground level. The other end of the box was covered by a square of gauze the color of dirt. A person looking directly at it might see the muzzle flash when Nick fired through the box. But with luck, the flash would be the last thing he saw.

Nick had fired through the gauze six times, perhaps killing three enemy, and the gauze now had a ragged hole in the center.

Okay, John thought, he'd be able to see slightly better through the hole in the center but staring that way would reduce the effective field of view, so he would deliberately try to look to one side or the other. How to type that down in a simple way? Someone cleared his throat.

John looked up from the typewriter. Sitting across from him was Ernest Hemingway, the weathered, wise Hemingway of the famous Karsh photograph.

"I'm afraid you must not do that," Hemingway said.

John looked at the half-full glass of absinthe and looked back. Hemingway was still there. "Jesus Christ," he said.

"It isn't the absinthe." Hemingway's image rippled and he became the handsome teenager who had gone to war, the war John was writing about. "I am quite real. In a way, I am more real than you are." As it spoke it aged: the mustachioed leading-man-handsome Hemingway of the twenties; the slightly corpulent, still magnetic media hero of the thirties and forties; the beard turning white, the features hard and sad and then twisting with impotence and madness, and then a sudden loud report and the cranial vault exploding, the mahogany veneer of the wall splashed with blood and brains and imbedded chips of skull. There was a strong smell of cordite and blood. The almost headless corpse shrugged,

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spreading its hands. "I can look like anyone I want." The mess disappeared and it became the young Hemingway again.

John slumped and stared.

"This thing you just started must never be finished. This Hemingway pastiche. It will ruin something very important."

"What could it ruin? I'm not even planning to—"

"Your plans are immaterial. If you continue with this project it will profoundly affect the future."

"You're from the future?"

"I'm from the future and the past and other temporalities that you can't comprehend. But all you need to know is that you must not write this Hemingway story. If you do, I or someone like me will have to kill you."

It gestured and a wand the size of a walking stick, half black and half white, appeared in its hand. It tapped John's knee with the white end. There was a slight tingle.

"Now you won't be able to tell anybody about me, or write anything about me down. If you try to talk about me, the memory will disappear—and reappear moments later, along with the knowledge that I will kill you if you don't cooperate." It turned into the bloody corpse again. "*Understood?*"

"Of course."

"If you behave, you will never have to see me again." It started to fade.

"Wait. What do you really look like?"

"This. . . ." For a few seconds John stared at an ebony presence deeper than black, at once points and edges and surfaces and volume and hints of further dimensions. "You can't really see or know," a voice whispered inside his head. He reached into the blackness and jerked his hand back, rimed with frost and numb. The thing disappeared.

He stuck his hand under his armpit and feeling returned. That last apparition was the unsettling one. He had Hemingway's appearance at every age memorized, and had seen the corpse in his mind's eye often enough. A drug could conceivably have brought them all together and made up this fantastic demand—which might actually be nothing more than a reasonable side of his nature trying to make him stop wasting time on this silly project.

But that thing. His hand was back to normal. Maybe a drug could do that, too; make your hand feel freezing. LSD did more profound things than that. But not while arguing about a manuscript.

He considered the remaining absinthe. Maybe take another big blast of it and see whether ol' Ernie comes back again. Or no—there was a simpler way to check.

The bar was four rocking and rolling cars away, and bouncing his way from wall to window helped sober John up. When he got there, he had another twinge for the memories of the past. Stained formica tables. No service; you had to go to a bar at the other end. Acrid with cigarette fumes. He remembered linen tablecloths and endless bottles of Coke with

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the names of cities from everywhere stamped on the bottom and, when his father came along with them, the rich sultry smoke of his Havanas. The fat Churchills from Punch that emphysema stopped just before Castro could. "A Coke, please." He wondered which depressed him more, the red can or the plastic cup with miniature ice cubes.

The test. It was not in his nature to talk to strangers on public conveyances. But this was necessary. There was a man sitting alone who looked about John's age, a Social-Security bound hippy with wire-rimmed John Lennon glasses, white hair down to his shoulders, bushy grey beard. He nodded when John sat down across from him, but didn't say anything. He sipped beer and looked blankly out at the gathering darkness.

"Excuse me," John said, "but I have a strange thing to ask you."

The man looked at him. "I don't mind strange things. But please don't try to sell me anything illegal."

"I wouldn't. It may have something to do with a drug, but it would be one I took."

"You do look odd. You tripping?"

"Doesn't feel like it. But I may have been . . . slipped something." He leaned back and rubbed his eyes. "I just talked to Ernest Hemingway."

"The writer?"

"In my roomette, yeah."

"Wow. He must be pretty old."

"He's dead! More than thirty years."

"Oh wow. Now that is something weird. What he say?"

"You know what a pastiche is?"

"French pastry?"

"No, it's when you copy . . . when you create an imitation of another person's writing. Hemingway's, in this case."

"Is that legal? I mean, with him dead and all."

"Sure it is, as long as you don't try to foist it off as Hemingway's real stuff."

"So what happened? He wanted to help you with it?"

"Actually, no . . . he said I'd better stop."

"Then you better stop. You don't fuck around with ghosts." He pointed at the old brass bracelet on John's wrist. "You in the 'Nam."

"Sixty-eight," John said. "Hue."

"Then you oughta know about ghosts. You don't fuck with ghosts."

"Yeah." What he'd thought was aloofness in the man's eyes, the set of his mouth, was aloneness, something slightly different. "You okay?"

"Oh yeah. Wasn't for a while, then I got my shit together." He looked out the window again, and said something weirdly like Hemingway: "I learned to take it a day at a time. The day you're in's the only day that's real. The past is shit and the future, hell, some day your future's gonna be that you got no future. So fuck it, you know? One day at a time."

John nodded. "What outfit were you in?"

"Like I say, man, the past is shit. No offense?"

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"No, that's okay." He poured the rest of his Coke over the ice and stood up to go.

"You better talk to somebody about those ghosts. Some kinda shrink, you know? It's not that they're not real. But just you got to deal with 'em."

"Thanks. I will." John got a little more ice from the barman and negotiated his way down the lurching corridor back to his compartment, trying not to spill his drink while also juggling fantasy, reality, past, present, memory. . . .

He opened the door and Hemingway was there, drinking his absinthe. He looked up with weary malice. "Am I going to have to kill you?"

What John did next would have surprised Castlemaine, who thought he was a nebbish. He closed the compartment door and sat down across from the apparition. "Maybe you can kill me and maybe you can't."

"Don't worry. I can."

"You said I wouldn't be able to talk to anyone about you. But I just walked down to the bar car and did."

"I know. That's why I came back."

"So if one of your powers doesn't work, maybe another doesn't. At any rate, if you kill me you'll never find out what went wrong."

"That's very cute, but it doesn't work." It finished off the absinthe and then ran a finger around the rim of the glass, which refilled out of nowhere.

"You're making assumptions about causality that are necessarily naïve, because you can't perceive even half of the dimensions that you inhabit."

"Nevertheless, you haven't killed me yet."

"And assumptions about my 'psychology' that are absurd. I am no more a human being than you are a paramecium."

"I'll accept that. But I would make a deal with a paramecium if I thought I could gain an advantage from it."

"What could you possibly have to deal with, though?"

"I know something about myself that you evidently don't, that enables me to overcome your don't-talk restriction. Knowing that might be worth a great deal to you."

"Maybe something."

"What I would like in exchange is, of course, my life, and an explanation of why I must not do the Hemingway pastiche. Then I wouldn't do it."

"You wouldn't do it if I killed you, either."

John sipped his Coke and waited.

"All right. It goes something like this. There is not just one universe, but actually uncountable zillions of them. They're all roughly the same size and complexity as this one, and they're all going off in a zillion different directions, and it is one hell of a job to keep things straight."

"You do this by yourself? You're God?"

"There's not just one of me. In fact, it would be meaningless to assign

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a number to us, but I guess you could say that altogether, we are God . . . and the Devil, and the Cosmic Puppet master, and the Grand Unification Theory, the Great Pumpkin and everything else. When we consider ourselves as a group, let me see, I guess a human translation of our name would be the Spacio-Temporal Adjustment Board."

"STAB?"

"I guess that is unfortunate. Anyhow, what STAB does is more the work of a scalpel than a knife." The Hemingway scratched its nose, leaving the absinthe suspended in midair. "Events are supposed to happen in certain ways, in certain sequences. You look at things happening and say cause-and-effect, or coincidence, or golly, that couldn't have happened in a million years—but you don't even have a clue. Don't even try to think about it. It's like an ant trying to figure out General Relativity."

"It wouldn't have a clue. Wouldn't know where to start."

The apparition gave him a sharp look and continued. "These universes come in bundles. Hundreds of them, thousands, that are pretty much the same. And they affect each other. Resonate with each other. When something goes wrong in one, it resonates and screws up all of them."

"You mean to say that if I write a Hemingway pastiche, hundreds of universes are going to go straight to hell?"

The apparition spread its hands and looked to the ceiling. "Nothing is simple. The only thing that's simple is that nothing is simple.

"I'm a sort of literature specialist. American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Usually. Most of my timespace is taken up with guys like Hemingway, Teddy Roosevelt, Heinlein, Bierce. Crane, Spillane, Twain."

"Not William Dean Howells?"

"Not him or James or Carver or Coover or Cheever or any of those guys. If everybody gave me as little trouble as William Dean Howells I could spend most of my timespace on a planet where the fishing was good."

"Masculine writers?" John said. "But not all hairy-chested macho types."

"I'll give you an A– on that one. They're writers who have an accumulating effect on the masculine side of the American national character. There's no one word for it, though it is a specific thing: individualistic, competence-worshiping, short-term optimism and long-term existentialism. 'There may be nothing after I die but I sure as hell will do the job right while I'm here, even though I'm surrounded by idiots.' You see the pattern?"

"Okay. And I see how Hemingway fits in. But how could writing a pastiche interfere with it?"

"That's a limitation I have. I don't know specifically. I do know that the accelerating revival of interest in Hemingway from the seventies through the nineties is vitally important. In the Soviet Union as well as the United States. For some reason, I can feel your pastiche interfering

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with it." He stretched out the absinthe glass into a yard-long amber crystal, and it changed into the black-and-white cane. The glass reappeared in the drink holder by the window. "Your turn."

"You won't kill me after you hear what I have to say?"

"No. Go ahead."

"Well . . . I have an absolutely eidetic memory. Everything I've ever seen—or smelled or tasted or heard or touched, or even dreamed—I can instantly recall.

"Every other memory freak I've read about was limited—numbers, dates, calendar tricks, historical details—and most of them were *idiots savants*. I have at least normal intelligence. But from the age of about three, I have never forgotten anything."

The Hemingway smiled congenially. "Thank you. That's exactly it." It fingered the black end of the cane, clicking something. "If you had the choice, would you rather die of a heart attack, stroke, or cancer?"

"That's it?" The Hemingway nodded. "Well, you're human enough to cheat. To lie."

"It's not something you could understand. Stroke?"

"It might not work."

"We're going to find out right now." He lowered the cane.

"Wait! What's death? Is there . . . anything I should do, anything you know?"

The rod stopped, poised an inch over John's knee. "I guess you just end. Is that so bad?"

"Compared to not ending, it's bad."

"That shows how little you know. I and the ones like me can never die. If you want something to occupy your last moment, your last thought, you might pity me."

John stared straight into his eyes. "Fuck you."

The cane dropped. A fireball exploded in his head.

12. Marriage is a Dangerous Game

"We'll blackmail him." Castle and Lena were together in the big antique bathtub, in a sea of pink foam, her back against his chest.

"Sure," she said. " 'If you don't let us pass this manuscript off as the real thing, we'll tell everybody you faked it.' Something wrong with that, but I can't quite put my finger on it."

"Here, I'll put mine on it."

She giggled. "Later. What do you mean, blackmail?"

"Got it all figured out. I've got this friend Pansy, she used to be a call girl. Been out of the game seven, eight years; still looks like a million bucks."

"Sure. We fix John up with this hooker—"

"Call girl isn't a hooker. We're talkin' class."

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"In the first place, John wouldn't pay for sex. He did that in Vietnam and it still bothers him."

"Not talkin' about pay. Talkin' about fallin' in love. While she meanwhile fucks his eyeballs out."

"You have such a turn of phrase, Sylvester. Then while his eyeballs are out, you come in with a camera."

"Yeah, but you're about six steps ahead."

"Okay, step two; how do we get them together? Church social?"

"She moves in next door." There was another upstairs apartment, unoccupied. "You and me and Julio are conveniently somewhere else when she shows up with all these boxes and that big flight of stairs."

"Sure, John would help her. But that's his nature; he'd help her if she were an ugly old crone with leprosy. Carry a few boxes, sit down for a cup of coffee, maybe. But not jump into the sack."

"Okay, you know John." His voice dropped to a husky whisper and he cupped her breasts. "But I know men, and I know Pansy . . . and Pansy could give a hard-on to a corpse."

"Sure, and then fuck his eyeballs out. They'd come out easier."

"What?"

"Never mind. Go ahead."

"Well . . . look. Do you know what a call girl does?"

"I suppose you call her up and say you've got this eyeball problem."

"Enough with the eyeballs. What she does, she works for like an escort service. That part of it's legal. Guy comes into town, business or maybe on vacation, he calls up the service and they ask what kind of companion he'd like. If he says, like, give me some broad with a tight ass, can suck the chrome off a bumper hitch—the guy says like 'I'm sorry, sir, but this is not that kind of a service.' But mostly the customers are pretty hip to it, they say, oh, a pretty young blonde who likes to go dancing."

"Meanwhile they're thinking about bumper hitches and eyeballs."

"You got it. So it starts out just like a date, just the guy pays the escort service like twenty bucks for getting them together. Still no law broken."

"Now about one out of three, four times, that's it. The guy knows what's going on but he don't get up the nerve to ask, or he really doesn't know the score, and it's like a real dull date. I don't think that happened much with Pansy."

"In the normal course of things, though, the subject of bumper hitches comes up."

"Uh huh, but not from Pansy. The guy has to pop the question. That way if he's a cop it's, what, entrapment."

"Do you know whether Pansy ever got busted?"

"Naw. Mainly the cops just shake down the hookers, just want a blow job anyhow. This town, half of 'em want a blowjob from guys.

"So they pop the question and Pansy blushes and says for you, I guess I could. Then, on the way to the motel or wherever she says, you know, I wouldn't ask this if we weren't really good friends, but I got to make

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a car payment by tomorrow, and I need like two hundred bucks before noon tomorrow?"

"And she takes MasterCard and Visa."

"No, but she sure as hell knows where every bank machine in town is. She even writes up an I.O.U." Castle laughed. "Told me a guy from Toledo's holdin' five grand of I.O.U.'s from her."

"All right, but that's not John. She could suck the chrome off his eyeballs and he still wouldn't be interested in her if she didn't know Hemingway from hummingbirds."

Castle licked behind her ear, a weird gesture that made her shiver. "That's the trump card. Pansy reads like a son of a bitch. She's got like a thousand books. So this morning I called her up and asked about Hemingway."

"And?"

"She's read them all."

She nodded slowly. "Not bad, Sylvester. So we promote this love affair and sooner or later you catch them in the act. Threaten to tell me unless John accedes to a life of crime."

"Think it could work? He wouldn't say hell, go ahead and tell her?"

"Not if I do my part . . . starting tomorrow. I'm the best, sweetest, lovingest wife in this sexy town. Then in a couple of weeks Pansy comes into his life, and there he is, luckiest man alive. Best of both worlds. Until you accidentally catch them *in flagrante delicioso.*"

"So to keep both of you, he goes along with me."

"It might just do it. It might just." She slowly levered herself out of the water and smoothed the suds off her various assets.

"Nice."

"Bring me that bumper hitch, Sylvester. Hold on to your eyeballs."

13. In Another Country

John woke up with a hangover of considerable dimension. The diluted glass of absinthe was still in the drink holder by the window. It was just past dawn, and a verdant forest rushed by outside. The rails made a steady hum; the car had a slight rocking that would have been pleasant to a person who felt well.

A porter knocked twice and enquired after Mr. Baird. "Come in." John said. A short white man, smiling, brought in coffee and Danish.

"What happened to George?"

"Pardon me, sir? George who?"

John rubbed his eyes. "Oh, of course. We must be past Atlanta."

"No, sir." The man's smile froze as his brain went into nutty-passenger mode. "We're at least two hours from Atlanta."

"George . . . is a tall back guy with gold teeth who—"

"Oh, you mean George Mason, sir. He does do this car, but he picks

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up the train in Atlanta, and works it to Miami and back. He hasn't had the northern leg since last year."

John nodded slowly and didn't ask what year it was. "I understand." He smiled up and read the man's nametag. "I'm sorry, Leonard. Not at my best in the morning." The man withdrew with polite haste.

Suppose that weird dream had not been a dream. The Hemingway creature had killed him—the memory of the stroke was awesomely strong and immediate—but all that death amounted to was slipping into another universe where George Mason was on a different shift. Or perhaps John had gone completely insane.

The second explanation seemed much more reasonable.

On the tray underneath the coffee, juice, and Danish was a copy of *USA Today*, a paper John normally avoided because, although it had its comic aspects, it didn't have any funnies. He checked the date, and it was correct. The news stories were plausible—wars and rumors of war—so at least he hadn't slipped into a dimension where Martians ruled an enslaved Earth or Barry Manilow was president. He turned to the weather map and stopped dead.

Yesterday the country was in the middle of a heat wave that had lasted weeks. It apparently had ended overnight. The entry for Boston, yesterday, was "72/58/sh." But it hadn't rained and the temperature had been in the nineties.

He went back to the front page and began checking news stories. He didn't normally pay much attention to the news, though, and hadn't seen a paper in several days. They'd canceled their *Globe* delivery for the six weeks in Key West and he hadn't been interested enough to go seek out a newsstand.

There was no mention of the garbage collectors' strike in New York; he'd overheard a conversation about that yesterday. A long obituary for a rock star he was sure had died the year before.

An ad for DeSoto automobiles. That company had gone out of business when he was a teen-ager.

Bundles of universes, different from each other in small ways. Instead of dying, or maybe because of dying, he had slipped into another one. What would be waiting for him in Key West?

Maybe John Baird.

He set the tray down and hugged himself, trembling. Who or what was he in this universe? All of his memories, all of his personality, were from the one he had been born in. What happened to the John Baird that was born in this one? Was he an associate professor in American Literature at Boston University? Was he down in Key West wrestling with a paper to give at Nairobi—or working on a forgery? Or was he a Fitzgerald specialist snooping around the literary attics of St. Paul, Minnesota?

The truth came suddenly. Both John Bairds were in this compartment, in this body. And the body was slightly different.

He opened the door to the small washroom and looked in the mirror. His hair was a little shorter, less grey, beard better trimmed.

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He was less paunchy and . . . something felt odd. There was feeling in his thigh. He lowered his pants and there was no scar where the sniper bullet had opened his leg and torn up the nerves there.

That was the touchstone. As he raised his shirt, the parallel memory flooded in. Puckered round scar on the abdomen; in this universe the sniper had hit a foot higher—and instead of the convalescent center in Cam Ranh Bay, the months of physical therapy and then back into the war, it had been peritonitis raging; surgery in Saigon and Tokyo and Walter Reed, and no more army.

But slowly they converged again. Amherst and U. Mass.—perversely using the G.I. Bill in spite of his access to millions—the doctorate on *The Sun Also Rises* and the instructorship at B.U., meeting Lena and virtuously waiting until after the semester to ask her out. Sex on the second date, and the third . . . but there they verged again. This John Baird hadn't gone back into combat to have his midsection sprayed with shrapnel from an American grenade that bounced off a tree; never had dozens of bits of metal cut out of his dick—and in the ensuing twenty-five years had made more use of it. Girl friends and even one disastrous homosexual encounter with a stranger. As far as he knew, Lena was in the dark about this side of him; thought that he had remained faithful other than one incident seven years after they married. He knew of one affair she had had with a colleague, and suspected more.

The two Johns' personalities and histories merged, separate but one, like two vines from a common root, climbing a single support.

Schizophrenic but not insane.

John looked into the mirror and tried to address his new or his old self—John A, John B. There were no such people. There was suddenly a man who had existed in two separate universes and, in a way, it was no more profound than having lived in two separate houses.

The difference being that nobody else knows there is more than one house.

He moved over to the window and set his coffee in the holder; picked up the absinthe glass and sniffed it, considered pouring it down the drain, but then put it in the other holder, for possible future reference.

Posit this: is it more likely that there are bundles of parallel universes prevailed over by a Hemingway lookalike with a magic cane, or that John Baird was exposed to a drug that he had never experienced before and it had had an unusually disorienting effect?

He looked at the paper. He had not hallucinated two weeks of drought. The rock star had been dead for some time. He had not seen a DeSoto in twenty years, and that was a hard car to miss. Tailfins that had to be registered as lethal weapons.

But maybe if you take a person who remembers every trivial thing, and zap his brain with oil of wormwood, that is exactly the effect: perfectly recalled things that never actually happened.

The coffee tasted repulsive. John put on a fresh shirt and decided not to shave and headed for the bar car. He bought the last imported beer

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in the cooler and sat down across from the long-haired white-bearded man who had an earring that had escaped his notice before, or hadn't existed in the other universe.

The man was staring out at the forest greening by. "Morning," John said.

"How do." The man looked at him with no sign of recognition.

"Did we talk last night?"

He leaned forward. "What?"

"I mean did we sit in this car last night and talk about Hemingway and Vietnam and ghosts?"

He laughed. "You're on somethin', man. I been on this train since two in the mornin' and ain't said boo to nobody but the bartender."

"You were in Vietnam?"

"Yeah, but that's over; that's shit." He pointed at John's bracelet. "What, you got ghosts from over there?"

"I think maybe I have."

He was suddenly intense. "Take my advice, man; I been there. You got to go talk to somebody. Some shrink. Those ghosts ain't gonna go 'way by themself."

"It's not that bad."

"It ain't the ones you killed." He wasn't listening. "Fuckin' dinks, they come back but they don't, you know, they just stand around." He looked at John and tears came so hard they actually spurted from his eyes. "It's your fuckin' friends, man, they all died and they come back now. . . ." He took a deep breath and wiped his face. "They used to come back every night. That like you?" John shook his head, helpless, trapped by the man's grief. "Every fuckin' night, my old lady, finally she said you go to a shrink or go to hell." He fumbled with the button on his shirt pocket and took out a brown plastic prescription bottle and stared at the label. He shook out a capsule. "Take a swig?" John pushed the beer over to him. He washed the pill down without touching the bottle to his lips.

He sagged back against the window. "I musta not took the pill last night, sometimes I do that. Sorry." He smiled weakly. "One day at a time, you know? You get through the one day. Fuck the rest. Sorry." He leaned forward again suddenly and put his hand on John's wrist. "You come outa nowhere and I lay my fuckin' trip on you. You don' need it."

John covered the hand with his own. "Maybe I do need it. And maybe I didn't come out of nowhere." He stood up. "I will see somebody about the ghosts. Promise."

"You'll feel better. It's no fuckin' cure-all but you'll feel better."

"Want the beer?"

He shook his head. "Not supposed to."

"Okay." John took the beer and they waved at each other and he started back.

He stopped in the vestibule between cars and stood in the rattling roar of it, looking out the window at the flashing green blur. He put his

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forehead against the cool glass and hid the blur behind the dark red of his eyelids.

Were there actually a zillion of those guys each going through a slightly different private hell? Something he rarely asked himself was "What would Ernest Hemingway have done in this situation?"

He'd probably have the sense to leave it to Milton.

14. The Dangerous Summer

Castle and Lena met him at the station in Miami and they drove back to Key West in Castle's old pick-up. The drone of the air-conditioner held conversation to a minimum, but it kept them cool, at least from the knees down.

John didn't say anything about his encounter with the infinite, or transfinite, not wishing to bring back that fellow with the cane just yet. He did note that the two aspects of his personality hadn't quite become equal partners yet, and small details of this world kept surprising him. There was a monorail being built down to Pigeon Key, where Disney was digging an underwater park. Gasoline stations still sold Regular. Castle's car radio picked up TV as well as AM/FM, but sound only.

Lena sat between the two men and rubbed up against John affectionately. That would have been remarkable for John-one and somewhat unusual for John-two. It was a different Lena here, of course; one who had had more of a sex life with John, but there was something more than that, too. She was probably sleeping with Castle, he thought, and the extra attention was a conscious or unconscious compensation, or defense.

Castle seemed a little harder and more serious in this world than the last, not only from his terse moodiness in the pickup, but from recollections of parallel conversations. John wondered how shady he actually was; whether he'd been honest about his police record.

(He hadn't been. In this universe, when Lena had asked him whether he had ever been in trouble with the police, he'd answered a terse "no." In fact, he'd done eight hard years in Ohio for an armed robbery he hadn't committed—the real robber hadn't been so stupid, here—and he'd come out of prison bitter, angry, an actual criminal. Figuring the world owed him one, a week after getting out he stopped for a hitchhiker on a lonely country road, pulled a gun, walked him a few yards off the road into a field of high corn, and shot him pointblank at the base of the skull. It didn't look anything like the movies.)

(He drove off without touching the body, which a farmer's child found two days later. The victim turned out to be a college student who was on probation for dealing—all he'd really done was buy a kilo of green and make his money back by selling bags to his friends, and one enemy—so the papers said **DRUG DEALER FOUND SLAIN IN GANGLAND-STYLE KILLING** and the police pursued the matter with no

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enthusiasm. Castle was in Key West well before the farmer's child smelled the body, anyhow.)

As they rode along, whatever Lena had or hadn't done with Castle was less interesting to John than what *he* was planning to do with her. Half of his self had never experienced sex, as an adult, without the sensory handicaps engendered by scar tissue and severed nerves in the genitals, and he was looking forward to the experience with relish that was obvious, at least to Lena. She encouraged him in not-so-subtle ways, and by the time they crossed the last bridge into Key West, he was ready to tell Castle to pull over at the first bush.

He left the typewriter in Castle's care and declined help with the luggage. By this time Lena was smiling at his obvious impatience; she was giggling by the time they were momentarily stalled by a truculent door key; laughed her delight as he carried her charging across the room to the couch, then clawing off a minimum of clothing and taking her with fierce haste, wordless, and keeping her on a breathless edge he drifted the rest of the clothes off her and carried her into the bedroom, where they made so much noise Julio banged on the ceiling with a broomstick.

They did quiet down eventually, and lay together in a puddle of mingled sweat, panting, watching the fan push the humid air around. "Guess we both get to sleep in the wet spot," John said.

"No complaints." She raised up on one elbow and traced a figure eight on his chest. "You're full of surprises tonight, Dr. Baird."

"Life is full of surprises."

"You should go away more often—or at least come back more often."

"It's all that Hemingway research. Makes a man out of you."

"You didn't learn this in a book," she said, gently taking his penis and pantomiming a certain motion.

"I did, though; an anthropology book." In another universe. "It's what they do in the Solomon Islands."

"Wisdom of Solomon," she said, lying back. After a pause: "They have anthropology books at JFK?"

"Uh, no." He remembered he didn't own that book in this universe. "Browsing at Wordsworth's."

"Hope you bought the book."

"Didn't have to." He gave her a long slow caress. "Memorized the good parts."

On the other side of town, six days later, she was in about the same position on Castle's bed, and even more exhausted.

"Aren't you overdoing the loving little wifey bit? It's been a week."

She exhaled audibly. "What a week."

"Missed you." He nuzzled her and made an unsubtle preparatory gesture.

"No, you don't." She rolled out of bed. "Once is plenty." She went to the mirror and ran a brush through her damp hair. "Besides, it's not me

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you missed. You missed *it*." She sat at the open window, improving the neighborhood's scenery. "*It*'s gonna need a Teflon lining installed."

"Old boy's feelin' his oats?"

"Not feeling *his* anything. God, I don't know what's gotten into him. Four, five times a day; six."

"Screwed, blewed, and tattooed. You asked for it."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't. I haven't had a chance to start my little act. He got off that train with an erection, and he still has it. No woman would be safe around him. Nothing wet and concave would be safe."

"So does that mean it's a good time to bring in Pansy? Or is he so stuck on you he wouldn't even notice her?"

She scowled at the brush, picking hair out of it. "Actually, Castle, I was just about to ask you the same thing. Relying on your well-known expertise in animal behavior."

"Okay." He sat up. "I say we oughta go for it. If he's a walkin' talkin' hard-on like you say . . . Pansy'd pull him like a magnet. You'd have to be a fuckin' monk not to want Pansy."

"Like Rasputin."

"Like who?"

"Never mind." She went back to the brush. "I guess, I guess one problem is that I really am enjoying the attention. I guess I'm not too anxious to hand him over to this champion sexpot."

"Aw, Lena—"

"Really. I do love him in my way, Castle. I don't want to lose him over this scheme."

"You're not gonna lose him. Trust me. You catch him dickin' Pansy, get mad, forgive him. Hell, you'll have him wrapped around your finger."

"I guess. You make the competition sound pretty formidable."

"Don't worry. She's outa there the next day."

"Unless she winds up in love with him. That would be cute."

"He's almost twice her age. Besides, she's a whore. Whores don't fall in love."

"They're women, Castle. Women fall in love."

"Yeah, sure. Just like on TV."

She turned away from him; looked out the window. "You really know how to make a woman feel great, you know?"

"Come on." He crossed over and smoothed her hair. She turned around but didn't look up. "Don't run yourself down, Lena. You're still one hell of a piece of ass."

"Thanks." She smiled into his leer and grabbed him. "If you weren't such a poet I'd trade you in for a vibrator."

15. In Praise of His Mistress

Pansy was indeed beautiful, even under normal conditions; delicate features, wasp waist combined with generous secondary sexual charac-

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teristics. The conditions under which John first saw her were calculated to maximize sexiness and vulnerability. Red nylon running shorts, tight and very short, and a white sleeveless T-shirt from a local bar that was stamped "LAST HETEROSEXUAL IN KEY WEST"—all clinging to her golden skin with a healthy sweat, the cloth made translucent enough to reveal no possibility of underwear.

John looked out the screen door and saw her at the other door, struggling with a heavy box while trying to make the key work. "Let me help you," he said through the screen, and stepped across the short landing to hold the box while she got the door open.

"You're too kind." John tried not to stare as he handed the box back. Pansy, of course, was relieved at his riveted attention. It had taken days to set up this operation, and would take more days to bring it to its climax, so to speak, and more days to get back to normal. But she did owe Castle a big favor and this guy seemed nice enough. Maybe she'd learn something about Hemingway in the process.

"More to come up?" John asked.

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to help. I can manage."

"It's okay. I was just goofing off for the rest of the day."

It turned out to be quite a job, even though there was only one load from a small rented truck. Most of the load was uniform and heavy boxes of books, carefully labeled LIT A-B, GEN REF, ENCY 1-12, and so forth. Most of her furniture, accordingly, was cinder blocks and boards, the standard student bookshelf arrangement.

John found out that despite a couple of dozen boxes marked LIT, Pansy hadn't majored in literature, but rather Special Education; during the school year, she taught third grade at a school for the retarded in Key Largo. She didn't tell him about the several years she'd spent as a call girl, but if she had, John might have seen a connection that Castle would never have made—that the driving force behind both of the jobs was the same, charity. The more-or-less easy forty dollars an hour for going on a date and then having sex was a factor, too, but she really did like making lonely men feel special, and had herself felt more like a social worker than a woman of easy virtue. And the hundreds of men who had fallen for her, for love or money, weren't responding only to her cheerleader's body. She had a sunny disposition and a natural, artless way of concentrating on a man that made him for a while the only man in the world.

John would not normally be an easy conquest. Twenty years of facing classrooms full of coeds had given him a certain wariness around attractive young women. He also had an impulse toward faithfulness, Lena having suddenly left town, her father ill. But he was still in the grip of the weird overweening horniness that had animated him since inheriting this new body and double-image personality. If Pansy had said "Let's do it," they would be doing it so soon that she would be wise to unwrap the condom before speaking. But she was being as indirect as her nature and mode of dress would allow.

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"Do you and your wife always come down here for the summer?"

"We usually go somewhere. Boston's no fun in the heat."

"It must be wonderful in the fall."

And so forth. It felt odd for Pansy, probably the last time she would ever seduce a man for reasons other than personal interest. She wanted it to be perfect. She wanted John to have enough pleasure in her to compensate for the embarrassment of their "accidental" exposure, and whatever hassle his wife would put him through afterwards.

She was dying to know why Castle wanted him set up, but he refused to tell. How Castle ever met a quiet, kindly gentleman like John was a mystery, too—she had met some of Castle's friends, and they had other virtues.

Quiet and kindly, but horny. Whenever she contrived, in the course of their working together, to expose a nipple or a little beaver, he would turn around to adjust himself, and blush. More like a teenager, discovering his sexuality, than a middle-aged married man.

He was a pushover, but she didn't want to make it too easy. After they had finished putting the books up on shelves, she said thanks a million; I gotta go now, spending the night house-sitting up in Islamorada. You and your wife come over for dinner tomorrow? Oh, then come on over yourself. No, that's all right, I'm a big girl. Roast beef okay? See ya.

Driving away in the rented truck, Pansy didn't feel especially proud of herself. She was amused at John's sexiness and looking forward to trying it out. But she could read people pretty well, and sensed a core of deep sadness in John. Maybe it was from Vietnam; he hadn't mentioned it, but she knew what the bracelet meant.

Whatever the problem, maybe she'd have time to help him with it—before she had to turn around and add to it.

Maybe it would work out for the best. Maybe the problem was with his wife, and she'd leave, and he could start over. . . .

Stop kidding yourself. Just lay the trap, catch him, deliver him. Castle was not the kind of man you want to disappoint.

16. Fiesta

She had baked the roast slowly with wine and fruit juice, along with dried apricots and apples plumped in port wine, seasoned with cinnamon and nutmeg and cardamom. Onions and large cubes of acorn squash simmered in the broth. She served new potatoes steamed with parsley and dressed Italian style, with garlicky olive oil and a splash of vinegar. Small Caesar salad and air-light *pan de agua,* the Cuban bread that made you forget every other kind of bread.

The way to a man's heart, her mother had contended, was through his stomach, and although she was accustomed to aiming rather lower, she thought it was probably a good approach for a long-time married man

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suddenly forced to fend for himself. That was exactly right for John. He was not much of a cook but he was an accomplished eater.

He pushed the plate away after three helpings. "God, I'm such a pig. But that was irresistible."

"Thank you." She cleared the table slowly, accepting John's offer to help. "My mother's 'company' recipe. So you think Hadley might have just thrown the stories away, and made up the business about the train?"

"People have raised the possibility. There she was, eight years older than this handsome hubby—with half the women on the Left Bank after him, at least in her mind—and he's starting to get published, starting to build a reputation. . . ."

"She was afraid he was going to 'grow away' from her? Or did they have that expression back then?"

"I think she was afraid he would start making money from his writing. She had an inheritance, a trust fund from her grandfather, that paid over two thousand a year. That was plenty to keep the two of them comfortable in Paris. Hemingway talked poor in those days, starving artist, but he lived pretty well."

"He probably resented it, too. Not making the money himself."

"That would be like him. Anyhow, if she chucked the stories to ensure his dependency, it backfired. He was still furious thirty years later—three wives later. He said the stuff had been 'fresh from the mint,' even if the writing wasn't so great, and he was never able to reclaim it."

She opened a cabinet and slid a bottle out of its burlap bag, and selected two small glasses. "Sherry?" He said why not? and they moved into the living room.

The living room was mysteriously devoid of chairs, so they had to sit together on the small couch. "You don't actually think she did it."

"No." John watched her pour the sherry. "From what I've read about her, she doesn't seem at all calculating. Just a sweet gal from St. Louis who fell in love with a cad."

"Cad. Funny old-fashioned word."

John shrugged. "Actually, he wasn't really a cad. I think he sincerely loved every one of his wives . . . at least until he married them."

They both laughed. "Of course it could have been something in between," Pansy said, "I mean, she didn't actually throw away the manuscripts, but she did leave them sitting out, begging to be stolen. Why did she leave the compartment?"

"That's one screwy aspect of it. Hadley herself never said, not on paper. Every biographer seems to come up with a different reason: she went to get a newspaper, she saw some people she recognized and stepped out to talk with them, wanted some exercise before the long trip . . . even Hemingway had two different versions—she went out to get a bottle of Evian water or to buy something to read. That one pissed him off, because she did have an overnight bag full of the best American writing since Mark Twain."

"How would you have felt?"

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"Felt?"

"I mean, you say you've written stories, too. What if somebody, your wife, made a mistake and you lost everything?"

He looked thoughtful. "It's not the same. In the first place, it's just a hobby with me. And I don't have that much that hasn't been published—when Hemingway lost it, he lost it for good. I could just go to a university library and make new copies of everything."

"So you haven't written much lately?"

"Not stories. Academic stuff."

"I'd love to read some of your stories."

"And I'd love to have you read them. But I don't have any here. I'll mail you some from Boston."

She nodded, staring at him with a curious intensity. "Oh hell," she said, and turned her back to him. "Would you help me with this?"

"What?"

"The zipper." She was wearing a clingy white summer dress. "Undo the zipper a little bit."

He slowly unzipped it a few inches. She did it the rest of the way, stood up and hooked her thumbs under the shoulder straps and shrugged. The dress slithered to the floor. She wasn't wearing anything else.

"You're blushing." Actually, he was doing a good imitation of a beached fish. She straddled him, sitting back lightly on his knees, legs wide, and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"Uh," he said.

"I just get impatient. You don't mind?"

"Uh . . . no?"

17. On Being Shot Again

John woke up happy but didn't open his eyes for nearly a minute, holding on to the erotic dream of the century. Then he opened one eye and saw it hadn't been a dream: the tousled bed in the strange room, unguents and sex toys on the nightstand, the smell of her hair on the other pillow. A noise from the kitchen; coffee and bacon smells.

He put on pants and went into the living room to pick up the shirt where it had dropped. "Good morning, Pansy."

"Morning, stranger." She was wearing a floppy terrycloth bathrobe with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She turned the bacon carefully with a fork. "Scrambled eggs okay?"

"Marvelous." He sat down at the small table and poured himself a cup of coffee. "I don't know what to say."

She smiled at him. "Don't say anything. It was nice."

"More than nice." He watched her precise motions behind the counter. She broke the eggs one-handed, two at a time, added a splash of water to the bowl, plucked some chives from a windowbox and chopped them with a small Chinese cleaver, rocking it in a staccato chatter; scraped

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them into the bowl, and followed them with a couple of grinds of pepper. She set the bacon out on a paper towel, with another towel to cover. Then she stirred the eggs briskly with the fork and set them aside. She picked up the big cast-iron frying pan and poured off a judicious amount of grease. Then she poured the egg mixture into the pan and studied it with alertness.

"Know what I think?" John said.

"Something profound?"

"Huh-uh. I think I'm in a rubber room someplace, hallucinating the whole thing. And I hope they never cure me."

"I think you're a butterfly who's dreaming he's a man. I'm glad I'm in your dream." She slowly stirred and scraped the eggs with a spatula.

"You like older men?"

"One of them." She looked up, serious. "I like men who are considerate . . . and playful." She returned to the scraping. "Last couple of boyfriends I had were all dick and no heart. Kept to myself the last few months."

"Glad to be of service."

"You could rent yourself out as a service." She laughed. "You must have been impossible when you were younger."

"Different." Literally.

She ran hot water into a serving bowl, then returned to her egg stewardship. "I've been thinking."

"Yes?"

"The lost manuscript stuff we were talking about last night, all the different explanations." She divided the egg into four masses and turned each one. "Did you ever read any science fiction?"

"No. Vonnegut."

"The toast." She hurriedly put four pieces of bread in the toaster. "They write about alternate universes. Pretty much like our own, but different in one way or another. Important or trivial."

"What, uh, what silliness."

She laughed and poured the hot water out of the serving bowl, and dried it with a towel. "I guess maybe. But what if . . . what if all of those versions were equally true? In different universes. And for some reason they all came together here." She started to put the eggs into the bowl when there was a knock on the door.

It opened and Ernest Hemingway walked in. Dapper, just twenty, wearing the Italian army cape he'd brought back from the war. He pointed the black and white cane at Pansy. "Bingo."

She looked at John and then back at the Hemingway. She dropped the serving bowl; it clattered on the floor without breaking. Her knees buckled and she fainted dead away, executing a half-turn as she fell so that the back of her head struck the wooden floor with a loud thump and the bathrobe drifted open from the waist down.

The Hemingway stared down at her frontal aspect. "Sometimes I wish

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I were human," it said. "Your pleasures are intense. Simple, but intense." It moved toward her with the cane.

John stood up. "If you kill her—"

"Oh?" It cocked an eyebrow at him. "What will you do?"

John took one step toward it and it waved the cane. A waist-high brick wall surmounted by needle-sharp spikes appeared between them. It gestured again and an impossible moat appeared, deep enough to reach down well into Julio's living room. It filled with water and a large crocodile surfaced and rested its chin on the parquet floor, staring at John. It yawned teeth.

The Hemingway held up its cane. "The white end. It doesn't kill, remember?" The wall and moat disappeared and the cane touched Pansy lightly below the navel. She twitched minutely but continued to sleep. "She'll have a headache," it said. "And she'll be somewhat confused by the uncommunicatable memory of having seen me. But that will all fade, compared to the sudden tragedy of having her new lover die here, just sitting waiting for his breakfast."

"Do you enjoy this?"

"I love my work. It's all I have." It walked toward him, footfalls splashing as it crossed where the moat had been. "You have not personally helped, though. Not at all."

It sat down across from him and poured coffee into a mug that said ON THE SIXTH DAY GOD CREATED MAN—SHE MUST HAVE HAD PMS.

"When you kill me this time, do you think it will 'take'?"

"I don't know. It's never failed before." The toaster made a noise. "Toast?"

"Sure." Two pieces appeared on his plate; two on the Hemingway's. "Usually when you kill people they stay dead?"

"I don't kill that many people." It spread margarine on its toast; gestured, and marmalade appeared. "But when I do, yeah. They die all up and down the Omniverse, every timespace. All except you." He pointed toast at John's toast. "Go ahead. It's not poison."

"Not my idea of a last meal."

The Hemingway shrugged. "What would you like?"

"Forget it." He buttered the toast and piled marmalade on it, determined out of some odd impulse to act as if nothing unusual were happening. Breakfast with Hemingway, big deal.

He studied the apparition and noticed that it was somewhat translucent, almost like a traditional TV ghost. He could barely see a line that was the back of the chair, bisecting its chest below shoulderblade level. Was this something new? There hadn't been too much light in the train; maybe he had just failed to notice it before.

"A penny for your thoughts."

He didn't say anything about seeing through it. "Has it occurred to you that maybe you're not *supposed* to kill me? That's why I came back?"

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The Hemingway chuckled and admired its nails. "That's a nearly content-free assertion."

"Oh really." He bit into the toast. The marmalade was strong, pleasantly bitter.

"It presupposes a higher authority, unknown to me, that's watching over my behavior, and correcting me when I do wrong. Doesn't exist, sorry."

"That's the oldest one in the theologian's book." He set down the toast and kneaded his stomach; shouldn't eat something so strong first thing in the morning. "You can only *assert* the nonexistence of something; you can't prove it."

"What you mean is *you* can't." He held up the cane and looked at it. "The simplest explanation is that there's something wrong with the cane. There's no way I can test it; if I kill the wrong person there's hell to pay up and down the Omniverse. But what I can do is kill you without the cane. See whether you come back again, some timespace."

Sharp, stabbing pains in his stomach now. "Bastard." Heart pounding slow and hard: shirt rustled in time to its spasms.

"Cyanide in the marmalade. Gives it a certain *frisson,* don't you think?"

He couldn't breathe. His heart pounded once, and stopped. Vicious pain in his left arm, then paralysis. From an inch away, he could just see the weave of the white tablecloth. It turned red and then black.

18. The Sun Also Rises

From blackness to brilliance: the morning sun pouring through the window at a flat angle. He screwed up his face and blinked.

Suddenly smothered in terrycloth, between soft breasts. "John, John."

He put his elbow down to support himself, uncomfortable on the parquet floor, and looked up at Pansy. Her face was wet with tears. He cleared his throat. "What happened?"

"You, you started putting on your foot and . . . you just fell over. I thought. . . ."

John looked down over his body, hard ropy muscle and deep tan under white body hair, the puckered bullet wound a little higher on the abdomen. Left leg ended in a stump just above the ankle.

Trying not to faint. His third past flooding back. Walking down a dirt road near Kontum, the sudden loud bang of the mine and he pitched forward, unbelievable pain, rolled over and saw his bloody boot yards away; grey, jagged shinbone sticking through the bloody smoking rag of his pants leg, bright crimson splashing on the dry dust, loud in the shocked silence; another bloodstain spreading between his legs, the deep mortal pain there—and he started to buck and scream and two men held him while the medic took off his belt and made a tourniquet and popped morphine through the cloth and unbuttoned his fly and slowly worked his pants down: penis torn by shrapnel, scrotum ripped open in a bright

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red flap of skin, bloody grey-blue egg of a testicle separating, rolling out. He fainted, then and now.

And woke up with her lips against his, her breath sweet in his lungs, his nostrils pinched painfully tight. He made a strangled noise and clutched her breast.

She cradled his head, panting, smiling through tears, and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Will you stop fainting now?"

"Yeah. Don't worry." Her lips were trembling. He put a finger on them. "Just a longer night than I'm accustomed to. An overdose of happiness."

The happiest night of his life, maybe of three lives. Like coming back from the dead.

"Should I call a doctor?"

"No. I faint every now and then." Usually at the gym, from pushing too hard. He slipped his hand inside the terrycloth and covered her breast. "It's been . . . do you know how long it's been since I . . . did it? I mean . . . three times in one night?"

"About six hours." She smiled. "And you can say 'fuck.' I'm no schoolgirl."

"I'll say." The night had been an escalating progression of intimacies, gymnastics, accessories. "Had to wonder where a sweet girl like you learned all that."

She looked away, lips pursed, thoughtful. With a light fingertip she stroked the length of his penis and smiled when it started to uncurl. "At work."

"What?"

"I was a prostitute. That's where I learned the tricks. Practice makes perfect."

"Prostitute. Wow."

"Are you shocked? Outraged?"

"Just surprised." That was true. He respected the sorority and was grateful to it for having made Vietnam almost tolerable, an hour or so at a time. "But now you've got to do something really mean. I could never love a prostitute with a heart of gold."

"I'll give it some thought." She shifted. "Think you can stand up?"

"Sure." She stood and gave him her hand. He touched it but didn't pull; rose in a smooth practiced motion, then took one hop and sat down at the small table. He started strapping on his foot.

"I've read about those new ones," she said, "the permanent kind."

"Yeah; I've read about them, too. Computer interface, graft your nerves onto sensors." He shuddered. "No, thanks. No more surgery."

"Not worth it for the convenience?"

"Being able to wiggle my toes, have my foot itch? No. Besides, the VA won't pay for it." That startled John as he said it: here, he hadn't grown up rich. His father had spent all the mill money on a photocopy firm six months before Xerox came on the market. "You say you 'were' a prostitute. Not any more?"

"No, that was the truth about teaching. Let's start this egg thing over."

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She picked up the bowl she had dropped in the other universe. "I gave up whoring about seven years ago." She picked up an egg, looked at it, set it down. She half-turned and stared out the kitchen window. "I can't do this to you."

"You . . . can't do what?"

"Oh, lie. Keep lying." She went to the refrigerator. "Want a beer?"

"Lying? No, no thanks. What lying?"

She opened a beer, still not looking at him. "I like you, John. I really like you. But I didn't just . . . spontaneously fall into your arms." She took a healthy swig and started pouring some of the bottle into a glass.

"I don't understand."

She walked back, concentrating on pouring the beer, then sat down gracelessly. She took a deep breath and let it out, staring at his chest. "Castle put me up to it."

"*Castle?*"

She nodded. "Sylvester Castlemaine, boy wonder."

John sat back stunned. "But you said you don't do that anymore," he said without too much logic. "Do it for money."

"Not for money," she said in a flat, hurt voice.

"I should've known. A woman like you wouldn't want. . . ." He made a gesture that dismissed his body from the waist down.

"You do all right. Don't feel sorry for yourself." Her face showed a pinch of regret for that, but she plowed on. "If it were just the obligation, once would have been enough. I wouldn't have had to fuck and suck all night long to win you over."

"No," he said, "that's true. Just the first moment, when you undressed. That was enough."

"I owe Castle a big favor. A friend of mine was going to be prosecuted for involving a minor in prostitution. It was a set-up, pure and simple."

"She worked for the same outfit you did?"

"Yeah, but this was free-lance. I think it was the escort service that set her up, sort of delivered her and the man in return for this or that."

She sipped at the beer. "Guy wanted a three-way. My friend had met this girl a couple of days before at the bar where she worked part-time . . . she looked old enough; said she was in the biz."

"She was neither?"

"God knows. Maybe she got caught as a juvie and made a deal. Anyhow, he'd just slipped it to her and suddenly cops comin' in the windows. Threw the book at him. 'Two inches, twenty years,' my friend said. He was a county commissioner somewhere, with enemies. Almost dragged my friend down with him. I'm *sorry*." Her voice was angry.

"Don't be." John said, almost a whisper. "It's understandable. Whatever happens, I've got last night."

She nodded. "So two of the cops who were going to testify got busted for possession, cocaine. The word came down and everybody remembered the woman was somebody else."

"So what did Castle want you to do? With me?"

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"Oh, whatever comes natural—or *un*-natural, if that's what you wanted. And later be doing it at a certain time and place, where we'd be caught in the act."

"By Castle?"

"And his trusty little VCR. Then I guess he'd threaten to show it to your wife, or the university."

"I wonder. Lena . . . she knows I've had other women."

"But not lately."

"No. Not for years."

"It might be different now. She might be starting to feel, well, insecure."

"Any woman who looked at you would feel insecure."

She shrugged. "That could be part of it. Could it cost you your job, too?"

"I don't see how. It would be awkward, but it's not as if you were one of my students—and even that happens, without costing the guy his job." He laughed. "Poor old Larry. He had a student kiss and tell, and had to run the Speakers' Committee for four or five years. Got allergic to wine and cheese. But he made tenure."

"So what is it?" She leaned forward. "Are you an addict or something?"

"Addict?"

"I mean how come you even *know* Castle? He didn't pick your name out of a phone book and have me come seduce you, just to see what would happen."

"No, of course not."

"So? I confess, you confess."

John passed a hand over his face and pressed the other hand against his knee, bearing down to keep the foot from tapping. "You don't want to be involved."

"What do you call last night, Spin the Bottle? I'm in*volved!*"

"Not the way I mean. It's illegal."

"Oh golly. Not really."

"Let me think." John picked up their dishes and limped back to the sink. He set them down there and fiddled with the straps and pad that connected the foot to his stump, then poured himself a cup of coffee and came back, not limping.

He sat down slowly and blew across the coffee. "What it is, is that *Castle* thinks there's a scam going on. He's wrong. I've taken steps to ensure that it couldn't work." His foot tapped twice.

"You think. You hope."

"No. I'm sure. Anyhow, I'm stringing Castle along because I need his expertise in a certain matter."

" 'A certain matter,' yeah. Sounds wholesome."

"Actually, that part's not illegal."

"So tell me about it."

"Nope. Still might backfire."

She snorted. "You know what might *back*fire. Fucking with Castle."

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"I can take care of him."

"You don't know. He may be more dangerous than you think he is."

"He talks a lot."

"You men." She took a drink and poured the rest of the bottle into the glass. "Look, I was at a party with him, couple of years ago. He was drunk, got into a little coke, started babbling."

"In vino veritas?"

"Yeah, and Coke is It. But he said he'd killed three people, strangers, just to see what it felt like. He liked it. I more than halfway believe him."

John looked at her silently for a moment, sorting out his new memories of Castle. "Well . . . he's got a mean streak. I don't know about murder. Certainly not over this thing."

"Which is?"

"You'll have to trust me. It's not because of Castle that I can't tell you." He remembered her one universe ago, lying helpless while the Hemingway lowered its cane onto her nakedness. "Trust me?"

She studied the top of the glass, running her finger around it. "Suppose I do. Then what?"

"Business as usual. You didn't tell me anything. Deliver me to Castle and his video camera; I'll try to put on a good show."

"And when he confronts you with it?"

"Depends on what he wants. He knows I don't have much money." John shrugged. "If it's unreasonable, he can go ahead and show the tape to Lena. She can live with it."

"And your department head?"

"He'd give me a medal."

19. in our time

So it wasn't the cane. He ate enough cyanide to kill a horse, but evidently only in one universe.

You checked the next day in all the others?

All 119. He's still dead in the one where I killed him on the train—

That's encouraging.

—but there's no causal resonance in the others.

Oh, but there is some resonance. He remembered you in the universe where you poisoned him. Maybe in all of them.

That's impossible.

Once is impossible. Twice is a trend. A hundred and twenty means something is going on that we don't understand.

What I suggest—

No. You can't go back and kill them all one by one.

If the wand had worked the first time, they'd all be dead anyhow. There's no reason to think we'd cause more of an eddy by doing them one at a time.

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It's not something to experiment with. As you well know.

I don't know how we're going to solve it otherwise.

Simple. Don't kill him. Talk to him again. He may be getting frightened, if he remembers both times he died.

Here's an idea. What if someone else killed him?

I don't know. If you just hired someone—made him a direct agent of your will—it wouldn't be any different from the cyanide. Maybe as a last resort. Talk to him again first.

All right. I'll try.

20. Of Wounds and Other Causes

Although John found it difficult to concentrate, trying not to think about Pansy, this was the best time he would have for the forseeable future to summon the Hemingway demon and try to do something about exorcising it. He didn't want either of the women around if the damned thing went on a killing spree again. They might just do as he did, and slip over into another reality—as unpleasant as that was, it was at least living—but the Hemingway had said otherwise. There was no reason to suspect it was not the truth.

Probably the best way to get the thing's attention was to resume work on the Hemingway pastiche. He decided to rewrite the first page to warm up, typing it out in Hemingway's style:

ALONG WITH YOUTH

1. Mitraigliatrice

The dirt on the side of the trench was never dry in the morning . If Fever could find a dry newspaper he could put it between his chest and the dirt when he went out to lean on the side of the trench and wait for the light .First light was the best time . You might have luck and see a muzzle flash to aim at . But patience was better than luck . Wait to see a helmet or a head without a helmet .

Fever looked at the enemy trench line through a rectangular box of wood that pushed through the trench wall at

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about ground level . The other end of the box was covered with a square of gauze the color of dirt . A man looking directly at it might see the muzzle flash when Fever fired through the box . But with luck , the flash would be the last thing he saw .

Fever had fired through the gauze six times . He' d potted at least three Austrians . Now the gauze had a ragged hole in the center . One bullet had come in the other way , an accident , and chiseled a deep gouge in the floor of the wooden box .Fever knew that he would be able to see the splinters sticking up before he could see any detail at the enemy trench line.

That would be maybe twenty minutes . Fever wanted a cigarette . There was plenty of time to go down in the bunker and light one . But it would fox his night vision . Better to wait .

Fever heard movement before he heard the voice . He picked up one of the grenades on the plank shelf to his left and his thumb felt the ring on the cotter pin . Someone was crawling in front of his position . Slow crawling but not too quiet . He slid his left forefinger through the ring and waited .

-----Help me, came a strained whisper .

Fever felt his shoulders tense . Of course many Austrians could speak Italian .

-----I am wounded . Help me . I can go no farther .

-----What is your name and unit , Fever whispered through the box .

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------Jean-Franco Dante . Four forty-seventh.

That was the unit that had taken such a beating at the evening show . -----At first light they will kill me .

-----All right. But I 'm coming over with a grenade in my hand . If you kill me , you die as well .

-----I will commend this logic to your superior officer . Please hurry .

Fever slid his rifle into the wooden box and eased himself to the top of the trench . He took the grenade out of his pocket and carefully worked the pin out, the arming lever held secure . He kept the pin around his finger so he could replace it .

He inched his way down the slope , guided by the man's whispers . After a few minutes his probing hand found the man's shoulder . -----Thank God . Make haste , now .

The soldier's feet were both shattered by a mine . He would have to be carried .

-----Don't cry out, Fever said . This will hurt .

------No sound , the soldier said . And when Fever raised him up onto his back there was only a breath . But his canteen was loose . It fell on a rock and made a loud hollow sound .

Firecracker pop above them and the night was all glare and bobbing shadow . A big machine-gun opened up rong, cararong, rong , rong . Fever headed for the parapet above as fast as he could but knew it was hopeless . He saw dirt spray twice to his right and then felt the thud of the bullet into the Italian , who

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said " Jesus " as if only annoyed , and they almost made it then but on the lip of the trench a hard snowball hit Fever behind the kneecap and they both went down in a tumble . They fell two yards to safety but the Italian was already dead .

Fever had sprained his wrist and hurt his nose falling and they hurt worse than the bullet . But he couldn't move his toes and he knew that must be bad . Then it started to hurt .

A rifleman closed the Italian's eyes and with the help of another clumsy one dragged Fever down the trench to the medical bunker . It hurt awfully and his shoe filled up with blood and he puked . They stopped to watch him puke and then dragged him the rest of the way .

The surgeon placed him between two keresene lanterns . He removed the puttee and shoe and cut the bloody pants leg with a straight razor . He rolled Fever onto his stomach and had four men hold him down while he probed for the bullet . The pain was great but Fever was insulted enough by the four men not to cry out . He heard the bullet clink into a metal dish . It sounded like the canteen .

"That's a little too pat, don't you think?" John turned around and there was the Hemingway, reading over his shoulder. " 'It sounded like the canteen,' indeed." Khaki army uniform covered with mud and splattered with bright blood. Blood dripped and pooled at its feet.

"So shoot me. Or whatever it's going to be this time. Maybe I'll rewrite the line in the next universe."

"You're going to run out soon. You only exist in eight more universes."

"Sure. And you've never lied to me." John turned back around and stared at the typewriter, tensed.

The Hemingway sighed. "Suppose we talk, instead."

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"I'm listening."

The Hemingway walked past him toward the kitchen. "Want a beer?"

"Not while I'm working."

"Suit yourself." It limped into the kitchen, out of sight, and John heard it open the refrigerator and pry the top off of a beer. It came back out as the five-year-old Hemingway, dressed up in girl's clothing, both hands clutching an incongruous beer bottle. It set the bottle on the end table and crawled up onto the couch with childish clumsiness.

"Where's the cane?"

"I knew it wouldn't be necessary this time," it piped. "It occurs to me that there are better ways to deal with a man like you."

"Do tell." John smiled. "What is 'a man like me'? One on whom your cane for some reason doesn't work?"

"Actually, what I was thinking of was curiosity. That is supposedly what motivates scholars. You *are* a real scholar, not just a rich man seeking legitimacy?"

John looked away from the ancient eyes in the boy's face. "I've sometimes wondered myself. Why don't you cut to the chase, as we used to say. A few universes ago."

"I've done spot-checks on your life through various universes," the child said. "You're always a Hemingway buff, though you don't always do it for a living."

"What else do I do?"

"It's probably not healthy for you to know. But all of you are drawn to the missing manuscripts at about this time, the seventy-fifth anniversary."

"I wonder why that would be."

The Hemingway waved the beer bottle in a disarmingly mature gesture. "The Omniverse is full of threads of coincidence like that. They have causal meaning in a dimension you can't deal with."

"Try me."

"In a way, that's what I want to propose. You will drop this dangerous project at once, and never resume it. In return, I will take you back in time, back to the Gare de Lyon on December 14, 1921."

"Where I will see what happens to the manuscripts."

Another shrug. "I will put you on Hadley's train, well before she said the manuscripts were stolen. You will be able to observe for an hour or so, without being seen. As you know, some people have theorized that there never was a thief; never was an overnight bag; that Hadley simply threw the writings away. If that's the case, you won't see anything dramatic. But the absence of the overnight bag would be powerful indirect proof."

John looked skeptical. "You've never gone to check it out for yourself?"

"If I had, I wouldn't be able to take you back. I can't exist twice in the same timespace, of course."

"How foolish of me. Of course."

"Is it a deal?"

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John studied the apparition. The couch's plaid upholstery showed through its arms and legs. It did appear to become less substantial each time. "I don't know. Let me think about it a couple of days."

The child pulled on the beer bottle and it stretched into a long amber stick. It turned into the black-and-white cane. "We haven't tried cancer yet. That might be the one that works." It slipped off the couch and sidled toward John. "It does take longer and it hurts. It hurts 'awfully.' "

John got out of the chair. "You come near me with that and I'll dropkick you into next Tuesday."

The child shimmered and became Hemingway in his mid-forties, a big-gutted barroom brawler. "Sure you will, Champ." It held out the cane so that the tip was inches from John's chest. "See you around." It disappeared with a barely audible pop, and a slight breeze as air moved to fill its space.

John thought about that as he went to make a fresh cup of coffee. He wished he knew more about science. The thing obviously takes up space, since its disappearance caused a vacuum, but there was no denying that it was fading away.

Well, not fading. Just becoming more transparent. That might not affect its abilities. A glass door is as much of a door as an opaque one, if you try to walk through it.

He sat down on the couch, away from the manuscript so he could think without distraction. On the face of it, this offer by the Hemingway was an admission of defeat. An admission, at least, that it couldn't solve its problem by killing him over and over. That was comforting. He would just as soon not die again, except for the one time.

But maybe he should. That was a chilling thought. If he made the Hemingway kill him another dozen times, another hundred . . . what kind of strange creature would he become? A hundred overlapping autobiographies, all perfectly remembered? Surely the brain has a finite capacity for storing information; he'd "fill up," as Pansy said. Or maybe it wasn't finite, at least in his case—but that was logically absurd. There are only so many cells in a brain. Of course he might be "wired" in some way to the John Bairds in all the other universes he had inhabited.

And what would happen if he died in some natural way, not dispatched by an inter-dimensional assassin? Would he still slide into another identity? That was a lovely prospect: sooner or later he would be 130 years old, on his deathbed, dying every fraction of a second for the rest of eternity.

Or maybe the Hemingway wasn't lying, this time, and he had only eight lives left. In context, the possibility was reassuring.

The phone rang; for a change, John was grateful for the interruption. It was Lena, saying her father had come home from the hospital, much better, and she thought she could come on home day after tomorrow. Fine, John said, feeling a little wicked; I'll borrow a car and pick you up at the airport. Don't bother, Lena said; besides, she didn't have a flight number yet.

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John didn't press it. If, as he assumed, Lena was in on the plot with Castle, she was probably here in Key West, or somewhere nearby. If she had to buy a ticket to and from Omaha to keep up her end of the ruse, the money would come out of John's pocket.

He hung up and, on impulse, dialed her parents' number. Her father answered. Putting on his professorial tone, he said he was Maxwell Perkins, Blue Cross claims adjuster, and he needed to know the exact date when Mr. Monaghan entered the hospital for this recent confinement. He said you must have the wrong guy; I haven't been inside a hospital in twenty years, knock on wood. Am I not speaking to John Franklin Monaghan? No, this is John *Frederick* Monaghan. Terribly sorry, natural mistake. That's okay; hope the other guy's okay, goodbye, good night, sir.

So tomorrow was going to be the big day with Pansy. To his knowledge, John hadn't been watched during sex for more than twenty years, and never by a disinterested, or at least dispassionate, observer. He hoped that knowing they were being spied upon wouldn't affect his performance. Or knowing that it would be the last time.

A profound helpless sadness settled over him. He knew that the last thing you should do, in a mood like this, was go out and get drunk. It was barely noon, anyhow. He took enough money out of his wallet for five martinis, hid the wallet under a couch cushion, and headed for Duval Street.

21. Dying, Well or Badly

John had just about decided it was too early in the day to get drunk. He had polished off two martinis in Sloppy Joe's and then wandered uptown because the tourists were getting to him and a band was setting up, depressingly young and cheerful. He found a grubby bar he'd never noticed before, dark and smoky and hot. In the other universes it was a yuppie boutique. Three Social Security drunks were arguing politics almost loudly enough to drown out the game show on the television. It seemed to go well with the headache and sour stomach he'd reaped from the martinis and the walk in the sun. He got a beer and some peanuts and a couple of aspirin from the bartender, and sat in the farthest booth with a copy of the local classified-ad newspaper. Somebody had obscurely carved FUCK ANARCHY into the tabletop.

Nobody else in this world knows what anarchy *is,* John thought, and the helpless anomie came back, intensified somewhat by drunken sentimentality. What he would give to go back to the first universe and undo this all by just not. . . .

Would that be possible? The Hemingway was willing to take him back to 1921; why not back a few weeks? Where the hell was that son of a bitch when you needed him, it, whatever.

The Hemingway appeared in the booth opposite him, an Oak Park

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teenager smoking a cigarette. "I felt a kind of vibration from you. Ready to make your decision?"

"Can the people at the bar see you?"

"No. And don't worry about appearing to be talking to yourself. A lot of that goes on around here."

"Look. Why can't you just take me back to a couple of weeks before we met on the train, back in the first universe? I'll just. . . ." The Hemingway was shaking its head slowly. "You can't."

"No. As I explained, you already exist there—"

"You said that *you* couldn't be in the same place twice. How do you know I can't?"

"How do you know you can't swallow that piano? You just can't."

"You thought I couldn't talk about you, either; you thought your stick would kill me. I'm not like normal people."

"Except in that alcohol does nothing for your judgment."

John ate a peanut thoughtfully. "Try this on for size: At 11:46 on June 3, a man named Sylvester Castlemaine sat down in Dos Hermosas and started talking with me about the lost manuscripts. The forgery would never have occurred to me if I hadn't talked to him. Why don't you go back and keep him from going into that cafe? Or just go back to 11:30 and kill him."

The Hemingway smiled maliciously. "You don't like him much."

"It's more fear than like or dislike." He rubbed his face hard, remembering. "Funny how things shift around. He was kind of likeable the first time I met him. Then you killed me on the train and in the subsequent universe, he became colder, more serious. Then you killed me in Pansy's apartment and in this universe, he has turned mean. Dangerously mean, like a couple of men I knew in Viet Nam. The ones who really love the killing. Like you, evidently."

It blew a chain of smoke rings before answering. "I don't 'love' killing, or anything else. I have a complex function and I fulfill it, because that is what I do. That sounds circular because of the limitations of human language.

"I can't go killing people right and left just to see what happens. When a person dies at the wrong time it takes forever to clean things up. Not that it wouldn't be worth it in your case. But I can tell you with certainty that killing Castlemaine would not affect the final outcome."

"How can you say that? He's responsible for the whole thing." John finished off most of his beer and the Hemingway touched the mug and it refilled. "Not poison."

"Wouldn't work," it said morosely. "I'd gladly kill Castlemaine any way you want—cancer of the penis is a possibility—if there was even a fighting chance that it would clear things up. The reason I know it wouldn't is that I am not in the least attracted to that meeting. There's no probability nexus associated with it, the way there was with your buying the Corona or starting the story on the train, or writing it down

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here. You may think that you would never have come up with the idea for the forgery on your own, but you're wrong."

"That's preposterous."

"Nope. There are universes in this bundle where Castle isn't involved. You may find that hard to believe, but your beliefs aren't important."

John nodded noncommittally and got his faraway remembering look. "You know . . . reviewing in my mind all the conversations we've had, all five of them, the only substantive reason you've given me not to write this pastiche, and I quote, is that 'I or someone like me will have to kill you.' Since that doesn't seem to be possible, why don't we try some other line of attack?"

It put out the cigarette by squeezing it between thumb and forefinger. There was a smell of burning flesh. "All right, try this: give it up or I'll kill Pansy. Then Lena."

"I've thought of that, and I'm gambling that you won't, or can't. You had a perfect opportunity a few days ago—maximum dramatic effect—and you didn't do it. Now you say it's an awfully complicated matter."

"You're willing to gamble with the lives of the people you love?"

"I'm gambling with a lot. Including them." He leaned forward. "Take me into the future instead of the past. Show me what will happen if I succeed with the Hemingway hoax. If I agree that it's terrible, I'll give it all up and become a plumber."

The old, wise Hemingway shook a shaggy head at him. "You're asking me to please fix it so you can swallow a piano. I can't. Even I can't go straight to the future and look around; I'm pretty much tied to your present and past until this matter is cleared up."

"One of the first things you said to me was that you were from the future. And the past. And 'other temporalities,' whatever the hell that means. You were lying then?"

"Not really." It sighed. "Let me force the analogy. Look at the piano."

John twisted half around. "Okay."

"You can't eat it—but after a fashion, I can." The piano suddenly transformed itself into a piano-shaped mountain of cold capsules, which immediately collapsed and rolled all over the floor. "Each capsule contains a pinch of sawdust or powdered ivory or metal, the whole piano in about a hundred thousand capsules. If I take one with each meal, I will indeed eat the piano, over the course of the next three hundred-some years. That's not a long time for me."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"It's not a *proof;* it's a demonstration." It reached down and picked up a capsule that was rolling by, and popped it into its mouth. "One down, 99,999 to go. So how many ways could I eat this piano?"

"Ways?"

"I mean I could have swallowed any of the hundred thousand first. Next I can choose any of the remaining 99,999. How many ways can—"

"That's easy. One hundred thousand factorial. A huge number."

"Go to the head of the class. It's ten to the godzillionth power. That

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represents the number of possible paths—the number of futures—leading to this one guaranteed, pre-ordained event: my eating the piano. They are all different, but in terms of whether the piano gets eaten, their differences are trivial.

"On a larger scale, every possible trivial action that you or anybody else in this universe takes puts us into a slightly different future than would have otherwise existed. An overwhelming majority of actions, even seemingly significant ones, make no difference in the long run. All of the futures bend back to one central, unifying event—except for the ones that you're screwing up!"

"So what is this big event?"

"It's impossible for you to know. It's not important, anyhow." Actually, it would take a rather cosmic viewpoint to consider the event unimportant: the end of the world.

Or at least the end of life on Earth. Right now there were two earnest young politicians, in the United States and Russia, who on 11 August 2006 would be President and Premier of their countries. On that day, one would insult the other beyond forgiveness, and a button would be pushed, and then another button, and by the time the sun set on Moscow, or rose on Washington, there would be nothing left alive on the planet at all—from the bottom of the ocean to the top of the atmosphere; not a cockroach, not a paramecium, not a virus, and all because there are some things a man just doesn't have to take, not if he's a real man.

Hemingway wasn't the only writer who felt that way, but he was the one with the most influence on this generation. The apparition who wanted John dead or at least not typing didn't know exactly what effect his pastiche was going to have on Hemingway's influence, but it was going to be decisive and ultimately negative. It would prevent or at least delay the end of the world in a whole bundle of universes, which would put a zillion adjacent realities out of kilter, and there would be hell to pay all up and down the Omniverse. Many more people than six billion would die—and it's even possible that all of Reality would unravel, and collapse back to the Primordial Hiccup from whence it came.

"If it's not important, then why are you so hell-bent on keeping me from preventing it? I don't believe you."

"*Don't* believe me, then!" At an imperious gesture, all the capsules rolled back into the corner and reassembled into a piano, with a huge crashing chord. None of the barflies heard it. "I should think you'd cooperate with me just to prevent the unpleasantness of dying over and over."

John had the expression of a poker player whose opponent has inadvertently exposed his hole card. "You get used to it," he said. "And it occurs to me that sooner or later I'll wind up in a universe that I really like. This one doesn't have a hell of a lot to recommend it." His foot tapped twice and then twice again.

"No," the Hemingway said. "It will get worse each time."

"You can't know that. This has never happened before."

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"True so far, isn't it?"

John considered it for a moment. "Some ways. Some ways not."

The Hemingway shrugged and stood up. "Well. Think about my offer." The cane appeared. "Happy cancer." It tapped him on the chest and disappeared.

The first sensation was utter tiredness, immobility. When he strained to move, pain slithered through his muscles and viscera, and stayed. He could hardly breathe, partly because his lungs weren't working and partly because there was something in the way. In the mirror beside the booth he looked down his throat and saw a large white mass, veined, pulsing. He sank back into the cushion and waited. He remembered the young wounded Hemingway writing his parents from the hospital with ghastly cheerfulness: "If I should have died it would have been very easy for me. Quite the easiest thing I ever did." I don't know, Ernie; maybe it gets harder with practice. He felt something tear open inside and hot stinging fluid trickled through his abdominal cavity. He wiped his face and a patch of necrotic skin came off with a terrible smell. His clothes tightened as his body swelled.

"Hey buddy, you okay?" The bartender came around in front of him and jumped. "Christ, Harry, punch nine-one-one!"

John gave a slight ineffectual wave. "No rush," he croaked.

The bartender cast his eyes to the ceiling. "Always on my shift?"

22. Death in the Afternoon

John woke up behind a dumpster in an alley. It was high noon and the smell of fermenting garbage was revolting. He didn't feel too well in any case; as if he'd drunk far too much and passed out behind a dumpster, which was exactly what had happened in this universe.

In this universe. He stood slowly to a quiet chorus of creaks and pops, brushed himself off, and staggered away from the malefic odor. Staggered, but not limping—he had both feet again, in this present. There was a hand-sized numb spot at the top of his left leg where a .51 caliber machine gun bullet had missed his balls by an inch and ended his career as a soldier.

And started it as a writer. He got to the sidewalk and stopped dead. This was the first universe where he wasn't a college professor. He taught occasionally—sometimes creative writing; sometimes Hemingway—but it was only a hobby now, and a nod toward respectability.

He rubbed his fringe of salt-and-pepper beard. It covered the bullet scar there on his chin. He ran his tongue along the metal teeth the army had installed thirty years ago. Jesus. Maybe it does get worse every time. Which was worse, losing a foot or getting your dick sprayed with shrapnel, numb from severed nerves, plus bullets in the leg and face and arm? If you knew there was a Pansy in your future, you would probably trade

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a foot for a whole dick. Though she had done wonders with what was left.

Remembering furiously, not watching where he was going, he let his feet guide him back to the oldster's bar where the Hemingway had showed him how to swallow a piano. He pushed through the door and the shock of air conditioning brought him back to the present.

Ferns. Perfume. Lacy underthings. An epicene sales clerk sashayed toward him, managing to look worried and determined at the same time. His nose was pierced, decorated with a single diamond button. "Si-i-r," he said in a surprisingly deep voice, "may I *help* you?"

Crotchless panties. Marital aids. The bar had become a store called The French Connection. "Guess I took a wrong turn. Sorry." He started to back out.

The clerk smiled. "Don't be shy. Everybody needs *some*thing here."

The heat was almost pleasant in its heavy familiarity. John stopped at a convenience store for a sixpack of greenies and walked back home.

An interesting universe; much more of a divergence than the other had been. Reagan had survived the Hinckley assassination and actually went on to a second term. Bush was elected rather than succeeding to the presidency, and the country had not gone to war in Nicaragua. The Iran/Contra scandal nipped it in the bud.

The United States was actually cooperating with the Soviet Union in a flight to Mars. There were no DeSotos. Could there be a connection?

And in this universe he had actually met Ernest Hemingway.

Havana, 1952. John was eight years old. His father, a doctor in this universe, had taken a break from the New England winter to treat his family to a week in the tropics. John got a nice sunburn the first day, playing on the beach while his parents tried the casinos. The next day they made him stay indoors, which meant tagging along with his parents, looking at things that didn't fascinate eight-year-olds.

For lunch they went to La Florida, on the off chance that they might meet the famous Ernest Hemingway, who supposedly held court there when he was in Havana.

To John it was a huge dark cavern of a place, full of adult smells. Cigar smoke, rum, beer, stale urine. But Hemingway was indeed there, at the end of the long dark wood bar, laughing heartily with a table full of Cubans.

John was vaguely aware that his mother resembled some movie actress, but he couldn't have guessed that that would change his life. Hemingway glimpsed her and then stood up and was suddenly silent, mouth open. Then he laughed and waved a huge arm. "Come on over here, daughter."

The three of them rather timidly approached the table, John acutely aware of the careful inspection his mother was receiving from the silent Cubans. "Take a look, Mary," he said to the small blond woman knitting at the table, "The Kraut."

The woman nodded, smiling, and agreed that John's mother looked

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just like Marlene Dietrich ten years before. Hemingway invited them to sit down and have a drink, and they accepted with an air of genuine astonishment. He gravely shook John's hand, and spoke to him as he would to an adult. Then he shouted to the bartender in fast Spanish, and in a couple of minutes his parents had huge daiquiris and he had a Coke with a wedge of lime in it, tropical and grown-up. The waiter also brought a tray of boiled shrimp. Hemingway even ate the heads and tails, crunching loudly, which impressed John more than any Nobel Prize. Hemingway might have agreed, since he hadn't yet received one, and Faulkner had.

For more than an hour, two Cokes, John watched as his parents sat hypnotized in the aura of Hemingway's famous charm. He put them at ease with jokes and stories and questions—for the rest of his life John's father would relate how impressed he was with the sophistication of Hemingway's queries about cardiac medicine—but it was obvious even to a child that they were in awe, electrified by the man's presence.

Later that night John's father asked him what he thought of Mr. Hemingway. Forty-four years later, John of course remembered his exact reply: "He has fun all the time. I never saw a grown-up who plays like that."

Interesting. That meeting was where his eidetic memory started. He could remember a couple of days before it pretty well, because they had still been close to the surface. In other universes, he could remember back well before grade school. It gave him a strange feeling. All of the universes were different, but this was the first one where the differentness was so tightly connected to Hemingway.

He was flabby in this universe, fat over old tired muscle, like Hemingway at his age, perhaps, and he felt a curious anxiety that he realized was a real *need* to have a drink. Not just desire, not thirst. If he didn't have a drink, something very very bad would happen. He knew that was irrational. Knowing didn't help.

John carefully mounted the stairs up to their apartment, stepping over the fifth one, also rotted in this universe. He put the beer in the refrigerator and took from the freezer a bottle of icy vodka—that was different—and poured himself a double shot and knocked it back, medicine drinking.

That spiked the hangover pretty well. He pried the top off a beer and carried it into the living room, thoughtful as the alcoholic glow radiated through his body. He sat down at the typewriter and picked up the air pistol, a fancy Belgian target model. He cocked it and with a practiced two-handed grip aimed at a paper target across the room. The pellet struck less than half an inch low.

All around the room the walls were pocked from where he'd fired at roaches, and once a scorpion. Very Hemingwayish, he thought; in fact, most of the ways he was different from the earlier incarnations of himself were in Hemingway's direction.

He spun a piece of paper into the typewriter and made a list:

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EH & me --

-- both had doctor fathers

-- both forced into music lessons

-- in high school wrote derivative stuff that didn't show promise

-- Our war wounds were evidently similar in severity and location. Maybe my groin one was worse; army doctor there said that in Korea (and presumably WWI), without helicopter dustoff, I would have been dead on the battlefield. (Having been wounded in the kneecap and foot myself, I know that H's story about carrying the wounded guy on his back is unlikely. It was a month before I could put any stress on the knee.) He mentioned genital wounds, possibly similar to mine, in a letter to Bernard Baruch, but there's nothing in the Red Cross report about them.

But in both cases, being wounded and surviving was the central experience of our youth. Touching death.

-- We each wrote the first draft of our first novel in six weeks (but his was better and more ambitious).

-- Both had unusual critical success from the beginning.

-- Both shy as youngsters and gregarious as adults.

-- Always loved fishing and hiking and guns; I loved the bullfight from my first corrida, but may have been influenced by H's books.

-- Spain in general

--have better women than we deserve

-- drink too much

-- hypochondria

-- accident proneness

-- a tendency toward morbidity

-- One difference. I will never stick a shotgun in my mouth and pull the trigger. Leaves too much of a mess.

He looked up at the sound of the cane tapping. The Hemingway was in the Karsh wise-old-man mode, but was nearly transparent in the

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bright light that streamed from the open door. "What do I have to do to get your attention?" it said. "Give you cancer again?"

"That was pretty unpleasant."

"Maybe it will be the last." It half sat on the arm of the couch and spun the cane around twice. "Today is a big day. Are we going to Paris?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something big happens today. In every universe where you're alive, this day glows with importance. I assume that means you've decided to go along with me. Stop writing this thing in exchange for the truth about the manuscripts."

As a matter of fact, he had been thinking just that. Life was confusing enough already, torn between his erotic love for Pansy and the more domestic, but still deep, feeling for Lena . . . writing the pastiche was kind of fun, but he did have his own fish to fry. Besides, he'd come to truly dislike Castle, even before Pansy had told him about the set-up. It would be fun to disappoint him.

"You're right. Let's go."

"First destroy the novel." In this universe, he'd completed seventy pages of the Up-in-Michigan novel.

"Sure." John picked up the stack of paper and threw it into the tiny fireplace. He lit it several places with a long barbecue match, and watched a month's work go up in smoke. It was only a symbolic gesture, anyhow; he could retype the thing from memory if he wanted to.

"So what do I do? Click my heels together three times and say 'There's no place like the Gare de Lyon'?"

"Just come closer."

John took three steps toward the Hemingway and suddenly fell up down sideways—

It was worse than dying. He was torn apart and scattered throughout space and time, being nowhere and everywhere, everywhen, being a screaming vacuum forever—

Grit crunched underfoot and coalsmoke was choking thick in the air. It was cold. Gray Paris skies glowered through the long skylights, through the complicated geometry of the black steel trusses that held up the high roof. Bustling crowds chattering French. A woman walked through John from behind. He pressed himself with his hands and felt real.

"They can't see us," the Hemingway said. "Not unless I will it."

"That was awful."

"I hoped you would hate it. That's how I spend most of my timespace. Come on." They walked past vendors selling paper packets of roasted chestnuts, bottles of wine, stacks of baguettes and cheeses. There were strange resonances as John remembered the various times he'd been here more than a half-century in the future. It hadn't changed much.

"There she is." The Hemingway pointed. Hadley looked worn, tired, dowdy. She stumbled, trying to keep up with the porter who strode along with her two bags. John recalled that she was just recovering from a bad

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case of the grippe. She'd probably still be home in bed if Hemingway hadn't sent the telegram urging her to come to Lausanne because the skiing was so good, at Chamby.

"Are there universes where Hadley doesn't lose the manuscripts?"

"Plenty of them," the Hemingway said. "In some of them he doesn't sell 'My Old Man' next year, or anything else, and he throws all the stories away himself. He gives up fiction and becomes a staff writer for the Toronto *Star*. Until the Spanish Civil War; he joins the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and is killed driving an ambulance. His only effect on American literature is one paragraph in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*."

"But in some, the stories actually do see print?"

"Sure, including the novel, which is usually called *Along With Youth*. There." Hadley was mounting the steps up into a passenger car. There was a microsecond of agonizing emptiness, and they materialized in the passageway in front of Hadley's compartment. She and the porter walked through them.

"Merci," she said, and handed the man a few sou. He made a face behind her back.

"Along With Youth?" John said.

"It's a pretty good book, sort of prefiguring *A Farewell To Arms*, but he does a lot better in universes where it's not published. *The Sun Also Rises* gets more attention."

Hadley stowed both the suitcase and the overnight bag under the seat. Then she frowned slightly, checked her wristwatch, and left the compartment, closing the door behind her.

"Interesting," the Hemingway said. "So she didn't leave it out in plain sight, begging to be stolen."

"Makes you wonder," John said. "This novel. Was it about World War I?"

"The trenches in Italy," the Hemingway said.

A young man stepped out of the shadows of the vestibule, looking in the direction Hadley took. Then he turned around and faced the two travelers from the future.

It was Ernest Hemingway. He smiled. "Close your mouth, John. You'll catch flies." He opened the door to the compartment, picked up the overnight bag, and carried it into the next car.

John recovered enough to chase after him. He had disappeared.

The Hemingway followed. "What *is* this?" John said. "I thought you couldn't be in two timespaces at once."

"That wasn't me."

"It sure as hell wasn't the real Hemingway. He's in Lausanne with Lincoln Steffens."

"Maybe he is and maybe he isn't."

"He knew my *name!*"

"That he did." The Hemingway was getting fainter as John watched.

"Was he another one of you? Another STAB agent?"

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"No. Not possible." It peered at John. "What's happening to you?"

Hadley burst into the car and ran right through them, shouting in French for the conductor. She was carrying a bottle of Evian water.

"Well," John said, "that's what—"

The Hemingway was gone. John just had time to think *Marooned in 1922?* when the railroad car and the Gare de Lyon dissolved in an inbursting cascade of black sparks and it was no easier to handle the second time, spread impossibly thin across all those light years and millennia, wondering whether it was going to last forever this time, realizing that it did anyhow, and coalescing with an impossibly painful *snap.*

Looking at the list in the typewriter. He reached for the Heinekin; it was still cold. He set it back down. "God," he whispered. "I hope that's that."

The situation called for higher octane. He went to the freezer and took out the vodka. He sipped the gelid syrup straight from the bottle, and almost dropped it when out of the corner of his eye he saw the overnight bag.

He set the open bottle on the counter and sleepwalked over to the dining room table. It was the same bag, slightly beat up, monogrammed EHR, Elizabeth Hadley Richardson. He opened it and inside was a thick stack of manila envelopes.

He took out the top one and took it and the vodka bottle back to his chair. His hands were shaking. He opened the folder and stared at the familiar typing.

ERNEST M. HEMINGWAY

ONE - EYE FOR MINE

Fever stood up . In the moon light he could see blood starting on his hands . His pants were torn at the knee and he knew it would be bleeding there too . He watched the lights of the caboose disappear in the trees where the track curved .

That lousy crut of a brakeman . He would get him some day .

Fever scuffed off the end of a tie and sat down to

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pick the cinders out of his hands and knee . He could use some water . The brakeman had his canteen .

He could smell a campfire . He wondered if it would be smart to go find it . He knew about the wolves , the human kind that lived along the rails and the disgusting things they liked . He wasn 't afraid of them but you didn 't look for trouble .

You don 't have to look for trouble , his father would say . Trouble will find you . His father didn' t tell him about wolves , though , ~~or about women~~ .

There was a noise in the brush . Fever stood up and slipped his hand around the horn grip of the fat Buck clasp knife in his pocket .

The screen door creaked open and he looked up to see Pansy walk in with a strange expression on her face. Lena followed, looking even stranger. Her left eye was swollen shut and most of that side of her face was bruised blue and brown.

He stood up, shaking with the sudden collision of emotions. "What the hell—"

"Castle," Pansy said. "He got outta hand."

"Real talent for understatement." Lena's voice was tightly controlled but distorted.

"He went nuts. Slappin' Lena around. Then he started to rummage around in a closet, rave about a shotgun, and we split."

"I'll call the police."

"We've already been there," Lena said. "It's all over."

"Of course. We can't work with—"

"No, I mean he's a *criminal*. He's wanted in Mississippi for second-degree murder. They went to arrest him, hold him for extradition. So no more Hemingway hoax."

"What Hemingway?" Pansy said.

"We'll tell you all about it," Lena said, and pointed at the bottle. "A little early, don't you think? You could at least get us a couple of glasses."

John went into the kitchen, almost floating with vodka buzz and anxious confusion. "What do you want with it?" Pansy said oh-jay and Lena said ice. Then Lena screamed.

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He turned around and there was Castle standing in the door, grinning. He had a pistol in his right hand and a sawed-off shotgun in his left.

"You cunts," he said. "You fuckin' cunts. Go to the fuckin' cops."

There was a butcher knife in the drawer next to the refrigerator, but he didn't think Castle would stand idly by and let him rummage for it. Nothing else that might serve as a weapon, except the air pistol. Castle knew that it wouldn't do much damage.

He looked at John. "You three're gonna be my hostages. We're gettin' outta here, lose 'em up in the Everglades. They'll have a make on my pickup, though."

"We don't have a car," John said.

"I *know* that, asshole! There's a Hertz right down on One. You go rent one and don't try nothin' cute. I so much as *smell* a cop, I blow these two cunts away."

He turned back to the women and grinned crookedly, talking hard-guy through his teeth. "Like I did those two they sent, the spic and the nigger. They said somethin' about comin' back with a warrant to look for the shotgun and I was just bein' as nice as could be, I said hell, come on in, don't need no warrant. I got nothin' to hide, and when they come in I take the pistol from the nigger and kill the spic with it and shoot the nigger in the balls. You shoulda heard him. Some nigger. Took four more rounds to shut him up."

Wonder if that means the pistol is empty, John thought. He had Pansy's orange juice in his hand. It was an old-fashioned Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum six-shot, but from this angle he couldn't tell whether it had been reloaded. He could try to blind Castle with the orange juice.

He stepped toward him. "What kind of car do you want?"

"Just a *car,* damn it. Big enough." A siren whooped about a block away. Castle looked wary. "Bitch. You told 'em where you'd be."

"No," Lena pleaded. "We didn't tell them anything."

"Don't do anything stupid," John said.

Two more sirens, closer. "I'll show you *stupid!*" He raised the pistols towards Lena. John dashed the orange juice in his face.

It wasn't really like slow motion. It was just that John didn't miss any of it. Castle growled and swung around and in the cylinder's chambers John saw five copper-jacketed slugs. He reached for the gun and the first shot shattered his hand, blowing off two fingers, and struck the right side of his chest. The explosion was deafening and the shock of the bullet was like being hit simultaneously in the hand and chest with baseball bats. He rocked, still on his feet, and coughed blood spatter on Castle's face. He fired again, and the second slug hit him on the other side of the chest, this time spinning him half around. Was somebody screaming? Hemingway said it felt like an icy snowball, and that was pretty close, except for the inside part, your body saying Well, time to close up shop. There was a terrible familiar radiating pain in the center of his chest, and John realized that he was having a totally superfluous heart attack. He pushed off from the dinette and staggered toward Castle again. He

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made a grab for the shotgun and Castle emptied both barrels into his abdomen. He dropped to his knees and then fell over on his side. He couldn't feel anything. Things started to go dim and red. Was this going to be the last time?

Castle cracked the shotgun and the two spent shells flew up in an arc over his shoulder. He took two more out of his shirt pocket and dropped one. When he bent over to pick it up, Pansy leaped past him. In a swift motion that was almost graceful—it came to John that he had probably practiced it over and over, acting out fantasies—he slipped both shells into their chambers and closed the gun with a flip of the wrist. The screen door was stuck. Pansy was straining at the knob with both hands. Castle put the muzzles up to the base of her skull and pulled one trigger. Most of her head covered the screen or went through the hole the blast made. The crown of her skull, a bloody bowl, bounced off two walls and went spinning into the kitchen. Her body did a spastic little dance and folded, streaming.

Lena was suddenly on his back, clawing at his face. He spun and slammed her against the wall. She wilted like a rag doll and he hit her hard with the pistol on the way down. She unrolled at his feet, out cold, and with his mouth wide open laughing silently he lowered the shotgun and blasted her pointblank in the crotch. Her body jack-knifed and John tried with all his will not to die but blackness crowded in and the last thing he saw was that evil grin as Castle reloaded again, peering out the window, presumably at the police.

It wasn't the terrible sense of being spread infinitesimally thin over an infinity of pain and darkness; things had just gone black, like closing your eyes. If this is death, John thought, there's not much to it.

But it changed. There was a little bit of pale light, some vague figures, and then colors bled into the scene, and after a moment of disorientation he realized he was still in the apartment, but apparently floating up by the ceiling. Lena was conscious again, barely, twitching, staring at the river of blood that pumped from between her legs. Pansy looked unreal, headless but untouched from the neck down, lying in a relaxed, improbable posture like a knocked-over department store dummy, blood still spurting from a neck artery out through the screen door.

His own body was a mess, the abdomen completely excavated by buckshot. Inside the huge wound, behind the torn coils of intestine, the shreds of fat and gristle, the blood, the shit, he could see sharp splintered knuckles of backbone. Maybe it hadn't hurt so much because the spinal cord had been severed in the blast.

He had time to be a little shocked at himself for not feeling more. Of course most of the people he'd known who had died did die this way, in loud spatters of blood and brains. Even after thirty years of the occasional polite heart attack or stroke carrying off friend or acquaintance, most of the dead people he knew had died in the jungle.

He had been a hero there, in this universe. That would have surprised his sergeants in the original one. Congressional Medal of Honor, so called,

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which hadn't hurt the sales of his first book. Knocked out the NVA machine-gun emplacement with their own satchel charge, then hauled the machine-gun around and wiped out their mortar and command squads. He managed it all with bullet wounds in the face and triceps. Of course without the bullet wounds he wouldn't have lost his cool and charged the machine-gun emplacement, but that wasn't noted in the citation.

A pity there was no way to trade the medals in—melt them down into one big fat bullet and use it to waste that crazy motherfucker who was ignoring the three people he'd just killed, laughing like a hyena while he shouted obscenities at the police gathering down below.

Castle fires a shot through the lower window and then ducks and a spray of automatic-weapon fire shatters the upper window, filling the air with a spray of glass; bullets and glass fly painlessly through John where he's floating and he hears them spatter into the ceiling and suddenly everything is white with plaster dust—it starts to clear and he is much closer to his body, drawing down closer and closer; he merges with it and there's an instant of blackness and he's looking out through human eyes again.

A dull noise and he looked up to see hundreds of shards of glass leap up from the floor and fly to the window; plaster dust in billows sucked up into bullet holes in the ceiling, which then disappeared.

The top windowpane reformed as Castle *un*crouched, pointed the shotgun, then jerked forward as a blossom of yellow flame and white smoke rolled back into the barrel.

His hand was whole, the fingers restored. He looked down and saw rivulets of blood running back into the hole in his abdomen, then individual drops; then it closed and the clothing restored itself; then one of the holes in his chest closed up and then the other.

The clothing was unfamiliar. A tweed jacket in this weather? His hands had turned old, liver spots forming as he watched. Slow like a plant growing, slow like the moon turning, thinking slowly too, he reached up and felt the beard, and could see out of the corner of his eye that it was white and long. He was too fat, and a belt buckle bit painfully into his belly. He sucked in and pried out and looked at the buckle, yes, it was old brass and said "GOTT MIT UNS," the buckle he'd taken from a dead German so long ago. The buckle Hemingway had taken.

John got to one knee. He watched fascinated as the stream of blood gushed back into Lena's womb, disappearing as Castle grinning jammed the barrels in between her legs, flinched, and did a complicated dance in reverse (while Pansy's decapitated body writhed around and jerked upright); Lena, sliding up off the floor, leaped up between the man's back and the wall, then fell off and ran backwards as he flipped the shotgun up to the back of Pansy's neck and seeming gallons of blood and tissue came flying from every direction to assemble themselves into the lovely head and face, distorted in terror as she jerked awkwardly at the door and then ran backwards, past Castle as he did a graceful pirouette,

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unloading the gun and placing one shell on the floor, which flipped up to his pocket as he stood and put the other one there.

John stood up and walked through some thick resistance toward Castle. Was it *time* resisting him? Everything else was still moving in reverse: Two empty shotgun shells sailed across the room to snick into the weapon's chambers; Castle snapped it shut and wheeled to face John—

But John wasn't where he was supposed to be. As the shotgun swung around, John grabbed the barrels—hot!—and pulled the pistol out of Castle's waistband. He lost his grip on the shotgun barrels just as he jammed the pistol against Castle's heart and fired. A spray of blood from all over the other side of the room converged on Castle's back and John felt the recoil sting of the Magnum just as the shotgun muzzle cracked hard against his teeth, mouthful of searing heat then blackness forever, back in the featureless infinite timespace hell that the Hemingway had taken him to, forever, but in the next instant, a new kind of twitch, a twist. . . .

23. The Time Exchanged

What does that mean, you "lost" him?

We were in the railroad car in the Gare de Lyon, in the normal observation mode. This entity that looked like Hemingway walked up, greeted us, took the manuscripts, and disappeared.

Just like that.

No. He went into the next car. John Baird ran after him. Maybe that was my mistake. I translated instead of running.

That's when you lost him.

Both of them. Baird disappeared, too. Then Hadley came running in—

Don't confuse me with Hadleys. You checked the adjacent universes.

All of them, yes. I think they're all right.

Think?

Well . . . I can't quite get to that moment. When I disappeared. It's as if I were still there for several more seconds, so I'm excluded.

And John Baird is still there?

Not by the time I can insert myself. Just Hadley running around—

No Hadleys. No Hadleys. So naturally you went back to 1996.

Of course. But there is a period of several minutes there from which I'm excluded as well. When I can finally insert myself, John Baird is dead.

Ah.

In every doomline, he and Castlemaine have killed each other. John is lying there with his head blown off, Castle next to him with his heart torn out from a pointblank pistol shot, with two very dis-

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traught women screaming while police pile in through the door. And this.

The overnight bag with the stories.

I don't think anybody noticed it. With Baird dead, I could spot-check the women's futures; neither of them mentions the bag. So perhaps the mission is accomplished.

Well, Reality is still here. So far. But the connection between Baird and this Hemingway entity is disturbing. That Baird is able to return to 1996 without your help is *very* disturbing. He has obviously taken on some of your characteristics, your abilities, which is why you're excluded from the last several minutes of his life.

I've never heard of that happening before.

It never has. I think that John Baird is no more human than you and I.

Is?

I suspect he's still around somewhen.

24. Islands in the Stream

and the unending lightless desert of pain becomes suddenly one small bright spark and then everything is dark red and a taste, a bitter taste, Hoppe's No. 9 gun oil and the twin barrels of the fine Boss pigeon gun cold and oily on his tongue and biting hard against the roof of his mouth; the dark red is light on the other side of his eyelids, sting of pain before he bumps a tooth and opens his eyes and mouth and lowers the gun and with shaking hands unloads—no, *dis*-loads—both barrels and walks backwards, shuffling in the slippers, slumping, stopping to stare out into the Idaho morning dark, helpless tears coursing up from the snarled white beard, walking backwards down the stairs with the shotgun heavily cradled in his elbow, backing into the storeroom and replacing it in the rack, then back up the stairs and slowly put the keys there in plain sight on the kitchen windowsill, a bit of mercy from Miss Mary, then sit and stare at the cold bad coffee as it warms back to one acid sip—

A tiny part of the mind saying *wait! I am John Baird it is 1996*

and back to a spiritless shower, numb to the needle spray, and cramped constipation and a sleep of no ease; an evening with Mary and George Brown tiptoeing around the blackest of black-ass worse and worse each day, only one thing to look forward to

got to throw out an anchor

faster now, walking through the Ketchum woods like a jerky cartoon in reverse, fucking FBI and IRS behind every tree, because you sent Ezra that money, felt sorry for him because he was crazy, what a fucking joke, should have finished the Cantos and shot himself.

effect preceding cause but I can read or hear scraps of thought somehow speeding to a blur now, driving in reverse hundreds of miles per hour

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back from Ketchum to Minnesota, the Mayo Clinic, holding the madness in while you talk to the shrink, promise not to hurt myself have to go home and write if I'm going to beat this, figuring what he wants to hear, then the rubber mouthpiece and smell of your own hair and flesh slightly burnt by the electrodes then deep total blackness

sharp stabs of thought sometimes stretching

hospital days blur by in reverse, cold chrome and starch white, a couple of mouthfuls of claret a day to wash down the pills that seem to make it worse and worse

what will happen to me when he's born?

When they came back from Spain was when he agreed to the Mayo Clinic, still all beat up from the plane crashes six years before in Africa, liver and spleen shot to hell, brain too, nerves, can't write or can't stop: all day on one damned sentence for the Kennedy book but a hundred thousand fast words, pure shit, for the bullfight article. Paris book okay but stuck. Great to find the trunks in the Ritz but none of the stuff Hadley lost.

Here it stops. A frozen tableau:

Afternoon light slanting in through the tall cloudy windows of the Cambon bar, where he had liberated, would liberate, the hotel in August 1944. A good large American-style martini gulped too fast in the excitement. The two small trunks unpacked and laid out item by item. Hundreds of pages of notes that would become the Paris book. But nothing before '23, of course. *the manuscripts* The novel and the stories and the poems still gone. One moment nailed down with the juniper sting of the martini and then time crawling rolling flying backwards again—

no control?

Months blurring by, Madrid Riviera Venice feeling sick and busted up, the plane wrecks like a quick one-two punch brain and body, blurry sick even before them at the Finca Vigia, can't get a fucking thing done after the Nobel Prize, journalists day and night, the prize bad luck and bullshit anyhow but need the $35,000

damn, had to shoot Willie, cat since the boat-time before the war, but winged a burglar too, same gun, just after the Pulitzer, now that was all right

slowing down again—Havana—the Floridita—

Even Mary having a good time, and the Basque jai alai players too though they don't know much English, most of them, interesting couple of civilians, the doctor and the Kraut lookalike, but there's something about the boy that makes it hard to take my eyes off him, looks like someone I guess, another round of Papa Dobles, that boy, what is it about him? and then the first round, with lunch, and things speeding up to a blur again.

out on the Gulf a lot, enjoying the triumph of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the easy good-paying work of providing fishing footage for the movie, and then back into 1951, the worst year of his life that far, weeks of

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grudging conciliation, uncontrollable anger, and black-ass depression from the poisonous critical slime that followed *Across the River*, bastards gunning for him, Harold Ross dead, mother Grace dead, son Gregory a dope addict hip-deep into the dianetics horseshit, Charlie Scribner dead but first declaring undying love for that asshole Jones

most of the forties an anxious blur, Cuba Italy Cuba France Cuba China found Mary kicked Martha out, thousand pages on the fucking *Eden* book wouldn't come together Bronze Star better than Pulitzer

Martha a chromeplated bitch in Europe but war is swell otherwise, liberating the Ritz, grenades rifles pistols and bomb runs with the RAF, China boring compared to it and the Q-ship runs off Cuba, hell, maybe the bitch was right for once, just kid stuff and booze

marrying the bitch was the end of my belle epoch, easy to see from here, the thirties all sunshine Key West Spain Key West Africa Key West, good hard writing with Pauline holding down the store, good woman but sorry I had to

sorry I had to divorce

stopping

Walking Paris streets after midnight:

I was never going to throw back at her losing the manuscripts. Told Steffens that would be like blaming a human for the weather, or death. These things happen. Nor say anything about what I did the night after I found out she really had lost them. But this one time we got to shouting and I think I hurt her. Why the hell did she have to bring the carbons what the hell did she think carbons were for stupid stupid stupid and she crying and she giving me hell about Pauline Jesus any woman who could fuck up Paris for you could fuck up a royal flush

it slows down around the manuscripts or me—

golden years the mid-twenties everything clicks Paris Vorarlburg Paris Schruns Paris Pamplona Paris Madrid Paris Lausanne

couldn't believe she actually

most of a novel dozens of poems stories sketches—*contes,* Kitty called them by God woman you show me your *conte* and I'll show you mine

so drunk that night I know better than to drink that much absinthe so drunk I was half crawling going up the stairs to the apartment I saw weird I saw God I saw *I saw myself standing there on the fourth landing with Hadley's goddamn bag*

I waited almost an hour, that seemed like no time or all time, and when he, when I, when he came crashing up the stairs he blinked twice, then I walked through me groping, shook my head without looking back and managed to get the door unlocked

flying back through the dead winter French countryside, standing in the bar car fighting hopelessness to Hadley crying so hard she can't get out what was wrong with Steffens standing gaping like a fish in a bowl

twisting again, painlessly inside-out, I suppose through various dimensions, seeing the man's life as one complex chord of beauty and

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purpose and ugliness and chaos, my life on one side of the Moebius strip, consistent through its fading forty-year span, starting, *starting,* here:

the handsome young man sits on the floor of the apartment holding himself, rocking racked with sobs, one short manuscript crumpled in front of him, the room a mess with drawers pulled out, their contents scattered on the floor, it's like losing an arm a leg (a foot a testicle), it's like losing your youth and along with youth

with a roar he stands up, eyes closed fists clenched, wipes his face dry and stomps over to the window

breathes deeply until he's breathing normally

strides across the room, kicking a brassiere out of his way

stands with his hand on the knob and thinks this:

life can break you but you can grow back strong at the broken places

and goes out slamming the door behind him, somewhat conscious of having been present at his own birth.

With no effort I find myself standing earlier that day in the vestibule of a train. Hadley is walking away, tired, looking for a vendor. I turn and confront two aspects of myself.

"Close your mouth, John. You'll catch flies."

They both stand paralyzed while I slide open the door and pull the overnight bag from under the seat. I walk away and the universe begins to tingle and sparkle.

I spend forever in the black void between timespaces. I am growing to enjoy it.

I appear in John Baird's apartment and set down the bag. I look at the empty chair in front of the old typewriter, the green beer bottle sweating cold next to it, and John Baird appears, looking dazed, and I have business elsewhere, elsewhen. A train to catch. I'll come back for the bag in twelve minutes or a few millennia, after the bloodbath that gives birth to us all.

25. A Moveable Feast

He wrote the last line and set down the pencil and read over the last page sitting on his hands for warmth. He could see his breath. Celebrate the end with a little heat.

He unwrapped the bundle of twigs and banked them around the pile of coals in the brazier. Crazy way to heat a room but it's France. He cupped both hands behind the stack and blew gently. The coals glowed red and then orange and with the third breath the twigs smoldered and a small yellow flame popped up. He held his hands over the fire, rubbing the stiffness out of his fingers, enjoying the smell of the birch as it cracked and spit.

He put a fresh sheet and carbon into the typewriter and looked at his penciled notes. Final draft? Worth a try:

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Ernest M. Hemingway,
74 rue du Cardinal Lemoine,
Paris, France

UP IN MICHIGAN

Jim Gilmore came to Horton's Bay from Canada.

He bought the blacksmith shop from old man Hortom

Shit, a typo. He flinched suddenly, as if struck, and shook his head to clear it. What a strange sensation to come out of nowhere. A sudden cold stab of grief. But larger somehow than grief for a person.

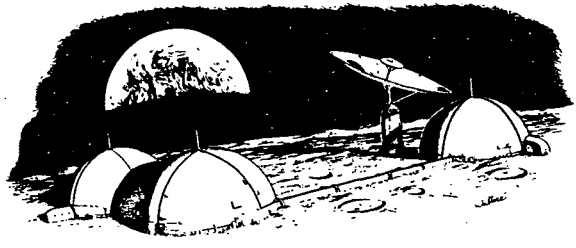
Grief for everybody, maybe. For being human.

From a typo?

He went to the window and opened it in spite of the cold. He filled his lungs with the cold damp air and looked around the familiar orange and grey mosaic of chimney pots and tiled roofs under the dirty winter Paris sky.

He shuddered and eased the window back down and returned to the heat of the brazier. He had felt it before, exactly that huge and terrible feeling. But where?

For the life of him he couldn't remember. ●



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(Continued from page 18)

here. But while playing *Legendary Axe* the strengths of the system became clear. In the game, a brawny hero battles his way past trolls, bears, dragons, and other foes to capture gold, treasure, and magical items. Nothing too extraordinary there. But as I played, all the people in the room *watched* the game. The graphics—featuring a cringing troll lashing with his axe, grimacing in frustration—come close to the fluidity, the detail of a cartoon. Giant bears arrive to a full-bodied musical theme—the sound is vastly improved—and they are fat, expressive and fully animated animals.

And beyond the wonderful detail and animation, there are the colors. A palette of 256 colors is available, and the shading brings a remarkable depth and detail to the screen. All the games come on a bit of plastic the size of a credit card. Compact, perhaps easy to lose, but very sleek.

SEGA has also entered the 16-bit race with *Genesis*. NEC first entered the game market in Japan in 1987 with the *PC Engine*, making it the hottest selling game system in Japan. They hope to make similar inroads here. . . .

My opinion? No one plays a video game just because it looks good. Yet the images on the Turbografx were absorbing, involving. It made the familiar gameplay much more exciting. It's a big step forward, and I can't imagine the kids who see ads on TV not clamoring for one.

Nintendo (PO Box 957) Redmond, WA 98073-0957), meanwhile, hasn't been resting on its laurels. Their new item is Game Boy, a hand-held video game system about the size of a walkman. It accepts small matchbook sized cartridges and it has a 2¼" LCD screen (not backlit).

My first impression was that it was a tad disappointing. The screen is black against a greenish background, and it's a bit fuzzy with its dot matrix images. You need to have the screen in bright light.

Then I let my kids play it. And they wouldn't let it go. Despite the graphic shortcomings, the games are fully-developed, really sophisticated video games. It comes with the popular Russian strategy game, *Tetris*. Other games include *Baseball* and *Super Mario Land*, a new adventure where Mario explores ancient tombs and continues hopping on, and over, baddies. There are as many levels in the game as you might find in a full-scale SuperMario game.

The screen scrolls smoothly and there's an earphone jack for stereo sound (which makes up a bit for the graphic austerity). With an accessory, you can link two Game Boys together for two-player games.

On a long family car trip, the machine just might be worth its weight in gold. ●

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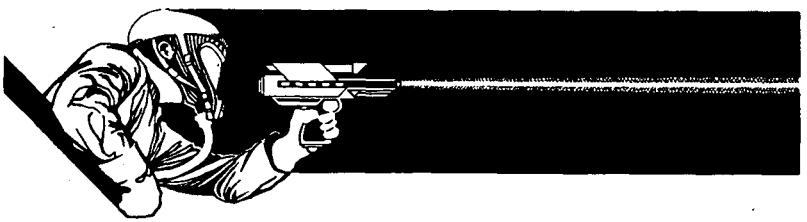

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

March is bustin' out all over with cons of every shape and kind, and I'm writing this just back from WorldCon with the latest news. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons enclose an SASE (again, make it plain what you're asking about). Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, making music.

MARCH, 1990

9-11—**WisCon.** For info, write: **Box 1624, Madison WI 53701.** Or call **(608) 233-5640** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Madison WI (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Emma Bull, Ian Banks. "The World's Only Feminist Science Fiction Convention."

16-18—**Lunacon. (201) 245-5922.** Marriott, Tarrytown NY. K. Kurtz, T. Canty, W. Cole, T. Doherty.

16-18—**MidSouthCon. (901) 274-7355.** Airport Hilton, Memphis TN. Robert Adams (health allowing).

16-18—**FanOut.** Hunt Valley Marriott, Baltimore MD. Media. G. R. R. Martin. Replacing ClipperCon.

23-25—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (404) 324-2559 or 549-1533.** Greenville SC.

23-25—**GrandCon, Box 88244, Grand Rapids MI 49518.** Star Trek/media. Trek novelist Diane Carey.

23-25—**ConGenial, Box 37317, Milwaukee WI 53237.** Charles de Lint, Stu Schiffman, Kathy Mar. Also Reed Waller, Kate Worley and The Shakers (band). Genie fanzine awards. Fanzine fandom emphasized.

23-25—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322.** C. J. Cherryh, Robert Daniels, Rusty Hevelin.

23-25—**NeoVention, U. of Akron Gaming Soc., GSC #6, Akron OH 44325.** On campus. Fantasy gaming.

29-Apr. 1—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010.** Zelazny, Cramer, Meuller.

30-Apr. 1—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6460 or -6472.** Cherryh, Bloch, Brin.

30-Apr. 1—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. (703) 953-1214.** L. McM. Bujold. On campus.

30-Apr. 1—**FreuCon, c/o Frick, Box 301, D-7290 Freudenstadt, West Germany. (0 84 41) 14 17.**

30-Apr. 1—**ReaderCon, Box 6138, Boston MA 02209. (617) 576-0415.** Disch, Budrys, Delany, Wolfe, Hartwell, Morrow, Windling, Gardner, Kelly, Kessell, Schweitzer, Wiater, Hlavaty, Friesner, Grant.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $85 to 7/15.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $75 to end of June.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $75 to 7/31/90.

AUGUST, 1992

28-Sep. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** The 1992 World SF Con. $50.

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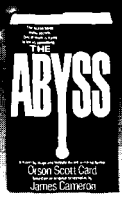

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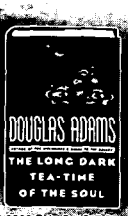

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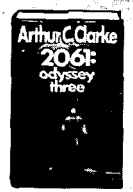

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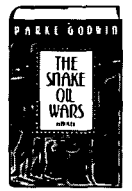

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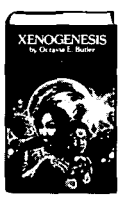

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